

A VALIANT IGNORANCE

MARY A. DICKENS



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A Novel

BY
MARY ANGELA DICKENS

AUTHOR OF "CROSS CURRENTS," "A MERE CYPHER," ETC.

"Thy gold is brass!"

PRINCE HOHENSTIEL SCHWANGAU

IN THREE VOLUMES
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A VALIANT IGNORANCE

CHAPTER I

THE oppressive autumn weather continued for the next week and more, but the atmosphere in the house at Chelsea gradually cleared ; at least, the electrical disturbances which had, as a matter of fact, culminated in Julian's departure for the club, subsided. As the days went on, Julian gradually recovered his spirits. His temper, which had given way so suddenly and completely under the strain put upon it by the unprecedented thwarting to which he had been subjected, recovered its careless easiness. The injured expression of moodiness disappeared wholly from his face, and his manner resumed its buoyancy.

Nevertheless, the life of the present autumn was by no means the life of the past spring. Partly, of course, the different framework was responsible ; life, especially at this particular

moment, when winter society was as yet hardly formed, consisted by no means wholly of a social existence. It was, in fact, distinctly "slack" and heavy on social lines as compared with the high pressure of the season ; and the introduction into the routine of life of a certain number of hours of regular work on Julian's part—the first practical acknowledgement in the house in Queen Anne Street, that work had anything to do with life—could not fail to alter the tone to some extent. But there was a subtle change in Julian himself, which was hardly to be accounted for on such broad lines. He had recovered his normal mental temperature, indeed, but the interval of disturbance seemed to have had some indefinable effect upon him. He had recovered himself—but it was himself with a difference. It was almost impossible to narrow the difference into words. To say that he was colder to his mother, or that he stood deliberately aloof from her, would not have been true. But there was a touch of independence about his whole personality which was new to it ; a certain suggestion of a separate life and separate interests, such as must inevitably come to a man sooner

or later, which seemed to tinge his intercourse with her—superficially the same as it remained—with something of carelessness, and even a hint of unconscious patronage.

If the change was felt by Mrs. Romaine, she made no sign; or, at least, entered no protest. After the little explanation which had taken place in the railway carriage she had utterly ignored the cloud which his moodiness had created; and she ignored its passing away. When Julian was at home she was always bright and pleasant; always charmed to have him with her; always ready to let him go. Her little jokes at his expense in his new character of a worker were full of tact. Her playful allusions to her own solitary days were always light and gay. Nevertheless, the characteristics which the ten weeks of their absence from town had brought to her face grew and intensified during the ten days that followed their return. Her eyes grew more restless, her mouth more sensitive, as though the strained, sharpened look of anxiety which haunted her face during the hour which preceded Julian's return, and during the whole evening, when, as happened several times in

the course of that ten days, he dined out, went deep enough to leave lasting tokens of its presence. Her questions as to his work, and the new friends, the new haunts, consequent upon it, seemed to come from her lips—far less self-confident in expression in these days—almost in spite of herself. They were always uttered with a playfulness which hardly masked a slight nervousness underneath; a nervousness which seemed to be a reminiscence of that first evening.

She was sitting alone in her drawing-room one afternoon towards the end of the second week of their return; she had a book in her hand, and a tea-table before her. But she had neither poured herself out any tea, nor could she be said to be reading. Every two or three minutes her attention seemed to wander; her eyes would stray vaguely about the room, and she would rise and move restlessly across it, to give some wholly unnecessary touch to a drapery or a glass of flowers. Once she had seated herself at her writing-table to begin a trivial note; but the impulse had failed to carry her through, and she had returned to her chair and her book.

It was half-past four, and she was expecting Julian. He had dined out on three consecutive nights, and was doing so again to-night. And in reply to her laughing protest against "never seeing him," he had promised carelessly to come home and have afternoon tea with her.

The door-bell rang at last, and as the drawing-room door opened she lifted a smiling face with a gaily approving comment on his punctuality.

"Good boy!" she began. Then she broke off and laughed lightly, though the brightness of her face suddenly ceased to be genuine.

The figure on the threshold was that of Marston Loring.

"Thank you," he said; "I am glad you think so!"

"The observation was not intended for you, I'm sorry to tell you," returned Mrs. Romaine, as she rose to receive him. "And I'm afraid even if I applied it to you, you would hardly condescend to accept it. How do you do? When did you come back? Sit down and let me give you some tea."

Loring sat down accordingly, with a mute witness in his manner of doing so to a certain amount of intimacy both with the room and its mistress; but that touch of admiring deference which had marked his demeanour during the early stages of his acquaintance with Mrs. Romaine, was still present with him, and was rendered only the more effective by the familiarity with which it was now combined.

“Thanks,” he said; “a cup of tea is a capital idea. But I don’t think it’s quite kind of you to say that I wouldn’t condescend to the epithet, ‘Good boy.’ I should like to have it applied to me of all things. It would be such a novelty, and so wholly undeserved!”

He spoke in that tone of sardonic daring on which a great deal of his social reputation rested, and Mrs. Romaine answered with a laugh.

“No doubt it would,” she said, with that very slight and unreal assumption of reproof with which such a woman invariably treats the tacit confessions of a man of Loring’s reputation. “You only want the epithet,

then, because you know you don't deserve it."

She handed him the tea as she spoke with a shake of her head, and added :

"But tell me, now, when did you come back, and where have you been?"

"I've been to the Engadine," he answered; "why, I don't know, unless that for six weeks, at least, of my life I might fully appreciate the charms of London! I don't admire glaciers; snow mountains bore me; altitudes are always more or less wearisome; and society *au naturel* is not to be tolerated. I reached town the day before yesterday."

Marston Loring was faultlessly dressed. It was impossible to associate his attire with anything but Piccadilly and the best clubs and the best drawing-rooms. His face, with its half-cynical, half-wearied expression, was, in its less individual characteristics, one of the typical faces of the society of the day. His voice and manner, well-bred, callous, and entirely unenthusiastic, were the voice and manner of that world where emotion is so entirely out of fashion that its existence as an

ineradicable factor of healthy human nature is hardly acknowledged.

His presence and his cynical, cold-blooded talk seemed to do Mrs. Romaine good. Her face and manner hardened slightly, as though her nerves were braced, and something of the pinched, restless look of anxiety faded.

"It's very nice of you to come and see us so soon!" she exclaimed with genuine satisfaction. "Town has really been abominably empty these last ten days. I suppose we came back rather too soon, but it seemed time that Julian should get to work. Really, I've hardly seen a soul."

"It is a deadly time of year," assented Loring, with a quick look at her, "but I'm grateful to it if it makes my presence welcome to you. Of course I called at once. I was rather afraid you might be still away."

"We came back ten days ago," answered Mrs. Romaine, accepting and putting aside his little compliment with a mocking gesture, as a form of words entirely conventional. "Julian has been quite lost without you."

He is looking very well, I think, and is working amazingly."

The introduction of Julian's name into the conversation had in neither case come from Julian's friend; but this time it appeared to strike Loring as incumbent upon him to pursue the topic.

"The approving words with which you received me were intended for him, I suppose," he said carelessly. "You're expecting him?"

There was a moment's pause while Mrs. Romaine turned her head, as if involuntarily, and listened intently; that haunted look coming suddenly back into her eyes. The moment passed, and she turned to Loring again with a quick, self-conscious glance, and an unreal laugh.

"I'm expecting him; yes," she said. "I'm ridiculous enough to make that very obvious, I'm afraid! I'm so glad he won't miss you. He doesn't generally come in at this hour. This is a treat—for me!"

She laughed, and Loring said with mock solemnity of interest:

"Indeed!"

"I really had to be quite plaintive this morning," she went on in the same tone, "on the subject of not seeing him for four days except at breakfast! He has made a good many new acquaintances already, it seems, and has to dine out a good deal."

"Really!" commented Loring. His tone was quite unmoved, and Mrs. Romaine did not see the expression in his shrewd, shallow eyes, as she spoke—an expression of amused curiosity. "He dines at his club, I suppose?" he enquired indifferently after a moment.

"Yes; or at some 'other fellow's' club," laughed his mother. "Legal institutions, I suppose!"

There was a brief silence; one of those silences which come when one branch of a conversation is felt to be exhausted; and then Loring finished his tea, put down his cup, and settled himself into a comfortable attitude.

"I forget whether you were taken with the Ibsen craze last season, Mrs. Romaine?" he said. "We shall all have to tie wet towels round our heads—it won't be be-

coming, I'm afraid—and give ourselves up to solitary meditation, I hear! He is to be the thing this winter, they tell me.”

“Ibsen?” repeated Mrs. Romaine reflectively; obviously searching in her memory for some ideas to attach to the name, which she was as obviously conscious of having heard before. “Ibsen? Oh, yes,” with a sudden flash of inspiration, “oh, yes, of course; that ‘Dolls’ House’ man, that everybody talked of going to see just at the end of the season.”

The first of those startling pictures of human nastiness which have since exercised criticism to so great an extent, and which may or may not be revelations, had taken a wonderful hold upon a certain section of “society,” and had become, as Mrs. Romaine’s words implied, almost the fashion in the preceding June. Society is always inclined to be literary and intellectual, or rather, to an assumption of those qualities, in the winter. It was with a sense of the absolute duty of priming herself beforehand that Mrs. Romaine continued, with every appearance of the deepest interest:

“Ah, no! I’m sorry to say I was never able to spare an evening. Everybody told me all about it, though. It must have been awfully clever and interesting. But, you see, just at that time one has so much on hand! There was that dreadful bazaar, too. By-the-bye, have the Pomeroy’s come back yet, do you know, Mr. Loring?”

Mr. Loring believed that they had not, and after a little discussion of their probable plans, Mrs. Romaine returned to the subject of Ibsen.

“Are they going to bring out a new play of his, did you say?” she said carelessly.

“So I hear,” answered Loring. “An extraordinary piece of work, with a tremendous theory in it, of course. The idea is the influence of heredity.”

Mrs. Romaine started slightly. A strange flash leapt up in her eyes, and as it died out, quenched as it seemed by iron resolution, it left a curious expression on her face; it was an expression in which a light scorn—the normal attitude of the shallow, fashionable woman towards deep questions of any

kind—seemed to be battling indomitably for a place against something which was hardly to be held at bay, by no means to be suppressed.

“Heredity!” she said; and the ring of her voice matched the expression of her face.

“It’s rather an interesting subject,” continued Loring indolently. Scientific questions in their social aspects were just becoming fashionable. “It’s wonderful how long we have stopped short at the inheritance of Roman noses, and violent tempers, and plain facts of that kind without getting to anything more subtle.”

“Yes; I suppose it is,” answered Mrs. Romaine. There was a hard restraint in her voice, which Loring took for preoccupation and laid to the account of her expectation of Julian. She was sitting with her back to the light, and he could not see the expression of her face.

“It’s awfully consoling, don’t you know,” he went on in the same tone, “to feel that one can lay all one’s little failings to the account of some dead and gone ancestor,

with a scientific mind. I don't notice, by-the-bye, that even the greatest and most enthusiastic scientists show any tendency to refer their virtues and talents back. I presume they are always self-developed."

Mrs. Romaine laughed, as she was obviously intended to do; but her laugh was rather harsh.

"Do you know, I think scientific men are a dreadful race!" she said. "They think that they know so much better than everybody else, and that what they know is so immensely important. As a rule, you know, it's about something that they really can't know anything about, and if they could, it would be a great deal better not to bother about it."

She spoke with a confident, conclusive superiority, which is only possible, perhaps, in that section of society to which knowledge and brain-power are among the minor and entirely unimportant factors of life—except when the knowledge is knowledge of the world, and the brain-power that which has adapted itself to the requirements of society. But the superiority in her tone rang strained

and false. She seemed to be forcing the attitude on herself even more than on Loring; and there was a faint ring of defiance in her voice—utterly inconsistent and incompatible with the words she spoke. The combination was curiously suggestive of that consuming fear which denies the very existence of that by which it is created.

Loring, however, was too fully occupied with a cynical appreciation of the humorous aspect of the wholesale condemnation of learning by crass ignorance to detect anything beneath the surface. An enigmatical smile touched his lips.

“There’s a great deal of penetration in what you say,” he said. “Of course, there would be! But I think you’re a little sweeping, perhaps, when you say that they don’t really know anything. Take heredity, for instance; it’s an actual fact, capable of demonstration, that——”

But Loring’s eloquence was broken short off. At that moment the door opened, and Julian Romaine came into the room.

Mrs. Romaine started to her feet at the sight of him with a strange, hardly articulate

sound, which was almost a gasp of relief, though it passed unnoticed by either of the two men, as Julian advanced quickly to Loring.

“How are you, old man?” he said pleasantly. “Awfully glad to see you back again.”

“This is the reward of merit, you see!” said Mrs. Romaine, as Loring replied, in the same tone. “You come home to tea with your mother, and you find a friend! Will you have some tea, sir?”

Her face was still a little odd, and unusual-looking, especially about the eyes; and the touch which she laid upon Julian, as if to enforce her words, was strangely clinging and nervous in its quick pressure.

The talk drifted in all sorts of directions after that; all more or less personal, either to the speakers, or to mutual acquaintances. As the moments passed, Loring’s eyes were fixed once or twice, with momentary intentness, on the younger man. That new touch of independence about Julian did not belong only to his manner with his mother. It was just perceptible towards the friend

whom he had hitherto admired with boyish enthusiasm.

Loring rose to go at last, and as he did so he turned to Julian.

"If it were not that I don't like to propose your deserting Mrs. Romaine," he said, "I should ask you if you wouldn't come and keep me company over a lonely dinner at the club, Julian? I suppose you don't want to get rid of him, by any chance?" he continued, turning to Mrs. Romaine.

Mrs. Romaine and Julian laughed simultaneously; Julian with a little touch of embarrassment.

"I'm sure my mother has no objection to getting rid of me," said Julian rather hastily; "but, unfortunately, I'm engaged."

"Engaged!" said Loring. "Lucky fellow, to have engagements at this time of year!"

His tone was a little satirical, and Julian, who was following him out of the room, flushed slightly. His colour was still considerably deeper than usual when he dashed upstairs after seeing Loring out, and put his head in at the drawing-room door.

"I'm afraid I must be off directly, dear," he said carelessly. "I was awfully sorry to get in so late, but Allardyce wanted me."

An hour later, Julian was dining at a restaurant, dining simply, and dining alone. Having finished his dinner, and smoked a cigarette, glancing once or twice at his watch as he did so, he took his hat and coat and strolled out. It was nearly a quarter past eight, and the only light was, of course, the light of the street-lamps and the gas in the shop windows.

He passed along Piccadilly, not quickly, but with the deliberate intention of a man who has a definite destination, until he came to a certain side-street. Then he turned out of Piccadilly, and slackening his steps, sauntered slowly up on the right-hand pavement. He had walked up to the end of the street, casting sundry glances back over his shoulder as he did so, and was turning once more, as though to saunter down the street again, when the figure of a woman entered at the Piccadilly end. As soon as he saw her, Julian threw away his cigar, and quickening his steps, went to meet her.

The face she raised to his was the face of the girl on whose behalf he had interfered in Piccadilly ten days before, and her first words were uttered in the soft, musical voice that had thanked him then.

"Have you been waiting?" she said; "I'm sorry."

The tone of the few words with which he answered, together with the expression with which he looked at her, showed as clearly as volumes of explanation could have done where and how the new Julian was being developed.

"Only a minute or two," he said. "A lonely fellow like me doesn't mind waiting a few minutes for the chance of a talk, as I've told you before."

She looked up at him with simple, pitying eyes, and a certain wistfulness of expression, too.

"It seems so sad!" she said softly. "But you'll make friends in London soon, I'm sure. Have you been working very hard to-day?"

"Have you been working very hard, is the more important question?" he said,

turning his eyes away from those candid brown ones, with, to do him justice, a certain passing shame in his own. "I'm afraid there's no need to ask that! You look awfully tired, Clemence!"

She shook her head with a pretty, brisk movement of reassurance.

"Oh, no!" she said, "it's not been at all a hard day. It never seems hard, you know, when we don't have to stay late, unless something goes wrong in the work-room; and I don't think that happens very often."

There was a simple, genuine content in the tone and manner in which the words were spoken, which, taken in conjunction with the colourlessness of the face, the tired look about the eyes, and the poor, worn dress, told a wonderful little story of patience and serenity of spirit.

All that Julian Romaine knew of Clemence Brymer—the brief and very simple outline of her life as she had told it to him—was comprised in a few by no means uncommon facts. She was a "hand" in one of the big millinery establishments, and had

worked at the same place for the last two years. Before that time she had lived from her childhood first with a married brother, and then, when he died, with his widow and children. From a certain touch of reserve in her manner of speaking of those particular years, Julian had gathered that they had been hard ones. The marriage of the brother's widow, and her departure to Australia, had left Clemence alone in London. Her parents, she told Julian, had come from Cambridgeshire; and one of her faint recollections of her father, who had died when she was only five years old, was of sitting on his knee in their little attic room in London, and being told by him about his country home. Her mother had died when she was a baby; and all her scanty recollections seemed to centre round the father, who, as she said simply, had been "a very good man."

The simple trust and confidence in her face as she raised it to Julian now was a curious contrast to the nervous, half-frightened uncertainty of her glance at him on that night in the spring when they had shared

for those two or three minutes the shelter of the same portico. But paradoxical as it seems at first, both expressions were the outcome, on different lines, of the same moral characteristic. Clemence, though there was that about her—as her face testified—which kept her, in all unconsciousness and innocence, strangely aloof and apart from her world, had not spent her life in London without learning to know its dangers. But the very purity which made the glances which she was forced to encounter in the streets at night a distress to her; which made the very proximity of an unknown “gentleman” an uneasiness to her; which made theoretical evil, in short, a terror to her; rendered her singularly incapable of recognising its existence on any but the baldest lines. Her confidence was quickly won because, though she was conscious of a world of evil about her, it was as a something large, and black, and obvious that she regarded it. Brought into contact with herself, anything fair-seeming was touched by the whiteness of her own temperament; and, with such unconscious extraneous aid,

the thinnest veil was enough to hide from her anything behind. Her confidence once won, might be destroyed, but could hardly be shaken. Something in Julian's face and manner had won it for him, and the outline of his circumstances which he had given her had won him something else—her pity.

Exactly by what motive he had been actuated in his statements to her, Julian would have found it rather hard to say; as a matter of fact he never asked himself the question. Before the end of their first walk together he had presented himself to her as a medical student living entirely alone in London, having no female friends, or even acquaintances, and wearying often of the rough masculine companionship of his fellows. On these grounds he had asked her when they parted at the end of a little poverty-stricken street near the farther end of the Hammer-smith Road, whether he might meet her now and again and walk home with her. She had hesitated for an instant, and then had assented, very simply.

“You haven't had to work late for four nights now,” she said, as they turned their

backs upon Piccadilly and began to walk steadily in the opposite direction. "Shall you have to to-morrow night, do you think?"

She lifted her eyes to his face as she spoke, and as he looked down and met them it would have been clear to an onlooker what was the charm that those long evening walks possessed for Julian. In the girl's clear eyes there was admiration and absolute reliance. In the look with which he answered them there was conscious superiority and protection.

Just at the moment when he was sore and smarting with a sense of humiliation and futility; when in his newly-aroused angry discontent all intercourse with women of his own class had become a farce and an inanity to him; accident had thrown it into his power to create for himself, as it were, a world in which all that had suddenly revealed itself as lacking in his actual life should be lavished upon him. For his acquaintance of Piccadilly he had absolutely no surroundings, except such as he chose to give himself. The Julian Romaine of

society, the nonentity, the "figure-head," as he had muttered angrily to himself, had no existence for her. It was Julian's own private Julian, a personality developed side by side with the sudden and violent re-adjustment of his conception of his relations with the world, who was looked up to, listened to, respected, and deferred to during the hour's walk which lay between that side-street out of Piccadilly and a certain little street out of the Hammersmith Road. A vague, undefined craving for pre-eminence and admiration had risen in him with his realisation of his dependence, and the reflected nature of the light with which he shone in society. To a weak nature in which that craving has once stirred it matters little by what means it is met, so that it is to some extent satisfied.

The walk of to-night was a repetition of the walks that had preceded it; the talk a little more intimate and a little more personal in tone than any of its predecessors, as that of each of the latter in its turn had been.

In the course of the day something had

occurred to remind Clemence of her father and her father's old home, and in intervals of Julian's talk about himself, she told him a good deal about her thoughts of that little country place; of how there had been Brymers here for generations and generations.

"You must have been Puritans once," said Julian, laughing, as he often laughed, at some little grave turn of her speech as he looked into the sweet, serious face. Work-girl as she was, she seemed to have acquired neither the talk nor the voice of her kind. The simple form of her words, her accent, and her gentle voice, seemed to belong to a past, quiet and full of a modest dignity of which the London of the nineteenth century hardly knows. "You would have made an awfully jolly little Puritan, Clemence!"

"I don't know," she said simply; "I was so little when father died. But he felt it dreadfully, I've heard, when he came to London; it nearly broke his heart."

"Why did he do it, then?" said Julian lightly.

"He thought he ought," returned the

girl. "You see, there was nothing to do at Feldbourne—nothing but ploughing, and country things, you know. And father thought a man ought to do something—that everything was meant to go on and get better, you know—and that every man ought to help, ought to work. So, of course, he was obliged to come, you see."

They had come to the end of the road now, where they always said good night, and as she spoke she was standing still, looking simply into his face. He looked at her for a moment with something in his eyes which seemed to be struggling vaguely into life side by side with the careless mockery of his "set."

"He was obliged to come, because he thought he ought," he said. "Do you always do what you think you ought, Clemence?"

"I try," she said simply. "Every one tries, I suppose."

He laughed—the laugh that was so like his mother's—but not quite so freely as usual, and held out his hand.

"I don't know about that," he said. "Good night, Clemence."

“Good night,” she said.

He hesitated a moment. He never went to meet her without a firm and definite intention of sealing their parting with a kiss. But he had never done so yet, and he did not do it now.

“Good night,” he said again, rather lamely; and then they parted, she going quickly and quietly down the street, he passing out of it into the noise and bustle of the Hammersmith Road.

Once there, he paused as though undecided.

“It’s too early to go home,” he said to himself. “I’ll go down to the club for a bit.”

There were a good many men in the club-room when he entered it half an hour later—and Julian—quite another young man to the Julian who had walked to the Hammersmith Road—was discussing the latest society topic with much animation over a whisky and seltzer, when Loring, to whom he had nodded at the other end of the room, strolled up to him, cigar in hand.

“Dinner been a failure?” he enquired.

There was nothing particular about the words; and the tone in which they were uttered was singularly, almost significantly, devoid of expression. But there was a keen, satirical expression in his eyes as he fixed them on Julian.

Julian started slightly at the words, and a curious flash of expression passed across his face.

"More or less," he said, with a careless frankness that seemed just a trifle excessive.

"Who was the man?"

"I don't think you know him," said Julian, his carelessness bordering on defiance.

Loring smiled. His smile was never particularly pleasant, and at this moment it was unusually cynical.

"I know a good many men, too," he observed.

CHAPTER II

THE slight alteration in Julian of which Marston Loring was conscious, and a subtly evinced consequence of that alteration—namely, that intimacy with the son no longer involved of necessity even an introduction, far less intimacy, at the mother's house—had no effect whatever upon Loring's relation with Mrs. Romaine, unless, indeed, it might be said to emphasize his position as friend of the house. During the three weeks which followed immediately upon his first call after his return to town, he saw at least as much of Mrs. Romaine as he had done in the course of any previous three weeks since Julian's first introduction of him ; though the young man was no longer an obvious and tangible link between them. He dined in Queen Anne Street a few days after his return, but except on that

occasion it chanced that he hardly ever met Mrs. Romaine and Julian together. He met the latter often enough at one or other of the clubs, or about town. On the former he called, as in duty bound, after the dinner, and again and yet again at short intervals. She had consulted him about a purchase of old oak, with which she wished to surprise Julian, and the purchase seemed to necessitate in his eyes frequent consultation. He also happened to meet her once or twice when she herself was paying calls.

She was always, apparently, pleased to see him. More pronounced, perhaps, when she met him among other people than when she received him alone, but still always more or less present, there was a certain eager, unconscious assertion of something like intimacy with him about her manner. Marston Loring was quick to observe the new note, and he prided himself likewise on the caution with which he refused to allow it even the value he believed it to possess. He caught her quick recognition of his presence ; her tendency to draw him always into the conversation in which she happened to be engaged ; the tacit

assumption of mutual interests and understanding lurking in her voice ; and he sifted and dismissed these things, cynically, as probably meaningless. But astute as he was, he never thought of them in connection with the constant references to Julian ; the questions as to Julian's doings ; with which her conversations with him were full. Of these latter he took hardly any account — except for an occasional sardonic smile. Clever as he thought himself, there were vast tracts of human nature to which he had no clue, in the very existence of which he disbelieved ; consequently, it was not surprising that he should now and then mistake cause for effect.

At about noon on a bright, cold October day he got out of a hansom at twenty-two, Queen Anne Street, with a certain cynical expectancy on his face. The weeks which had passed since Mrs. Romaine and Julian returned to town on that close September day had brought on winter, and had settled winter society fairly into its grooves ; and on the previous evening Marston Loring and Mrs. Romaine had met at a dinner-party. Mrs. Romaine had been alone. To enquiries made

for her son, and regrets at his absence, she had replied, with a gaiety which became absolutely feverish as the evening wore on, that he was unfortunately engaged. Throughout the evening, as though some kind of strain were acting upon her self-control, all the characteristics of her demeanour towards Loring had been slightly exaggerated. Loring had detected, before he had exchanged two sentences with her, that she was not herself; that she was unstrung and nervous; and arguing on totally false premises he had come to a totally false conclusion. She had pressed him restlessly about the commission he was doing for her, and he had twisted it this morning into an excuse for coming to see her when he knew she would be at home.

"It is an unheard-of hour, I know," he said, as she rose to receive him with an exclamation of surprise. "But I want a little more detail, and one or two measurements, before I can execute your orders satisfactorily."

He had seen before she spoke that the weakness of the night before, from whatever cause it had arisen, had passed away;

the lines about her face were set into a determined, uncompromising cheerfulness, and her voice as she spoke conveyed the same impression.

"It is more than kind of you, and I am very glad to see you," she said. "I'm always glad to see Julian's friend, you know." The last words with a laugh. "You don't happen to have met him this morning, I suppose?"

Loring signified, without a hint of sarcasm, that it was more common not to meet the man one would wish to meet in the Temple than to meet him, and Mrs. Romaine laughed again.

"I know," she said. "But one gets an absurd impression that men doing the same thing in the same place must be always coming across one another. It's very ridiculous, of course. You and he have always had a knack of finding one another out, though. I suppose you are quite one another's greatest chums, aren't you? Is 'chum' still the word, by-the-bye?"

"I believe so," returned Loring carelessly. "Yes," he continued in a different tone, "I

don't know when I've taken to any one as I took to Julian."

There was a little gesture, half-mocking, half involuntary, which accepted the words as a personal compliment, and Mrs. Romaine said with a smile :

"You are a curious pair of friends, too, are you not ? Julian"—her voice in uttering the name seemed to have acquired a new tenderness in the past month, and lingered over it now, evidently unconsciously and involuntarily—"Julian is such a boy, and you are—a great deal older than you ought to be."

She shook her head at him with a reprov-
ing laugh, and he answered in his most *blasé*
manner :

"I'm a man of the world, you see. I knew it all through and through before Julian had left school. I hope you wouldn't have preferred another boy for his 'chum'!"

There was a daring and a challenge in his tone which made the question personal rather to himself than to Julian ; but Mrs. Romaine took it from the other point of view.

“Quite the contrary!” she said quickly. “Another boy would not have been at all the thing for him. I am delighted to think that his mentor is a wise one. I rely on you, Mr. Loring, do you know!”

She stopped abruptly. The last words, uttered suddenly and involuntarily, had seemed curiously charged with a meaning which could not get itself expressed. She paused an instant and then, half as though she wished to laugh some impression away, half as though she wished the words to have significance, she added :

“You’ll remember that, won’t you? Shall we go down and see about the fittings?”

She rose as she spoke and led the way down to Julian’s room. The room was already as perfect as might be. Only a great restlessness, an irrepressible and incessant impulse to give pleasure to its occupant, could have dictated further improvements; and as Mrs. Romaine talked and explained, the same restless instinct of service expressed itself in sundry little involuntary touches to trifles about the room—about Julian’s chair and his writing-table.

The door-bell rang at length, and her face, over which that new and weaker expression had stolen, hardened suddenly.

"I'm afraid I must send you away now!" she said, turning to Loring. "I've made an appointment for this morning to get through some bothering business. You understand now just what I want, though, don't you?"

"I think so!" answered Loring reflectively. It would have been strange indeed if he had not understood by this time. "But I'm sorry I must go!"

"I'm sorry too!" said Mrs. Romaine lightly. "I hate business, and it loses none of its solemnity, I can assure you, when it is transacted by my connexion, Dennis Falconer. He is my trustee, you know!"

Loring smiled. He did not detect anything behind her words, and it struck him always as perfectly natural that Mrs. Romaine and her "connexion" should be somewhat antagonistic. "I should imagine he would be a rather ponderous man of business!" he said.

The parlour-maid entered at this moment to announce that Mr. Dennis Falconer was in

the drawing-room, and as they left the room Mrs. Romaine turned again to Loring.

"To tell you the truth I find him rather ponderous at all times!" she said with a laugh. "Didn't you say once that altitudes were oppressive? Well, I must go and be oppressed!"

She held out her hand as she spoke, and then paused.

"Oh, by - the - bye," she said, "Julian wants you to come and dine one day next week—only he's so much engaged. Which day will suit you?"

"Thanks!" answered Loring. "I shall be charmed!" His face was quite impassive as he spoke, but he was wondering nevertheless whether Julian had as yet heard of the invitation. From what he had observed lately, he fancied that Julian had reasons of his own for avoiding home engagements. "I am engaged on Tuesday and Thursday," he continued, "but on any other day I shall be delighted. Did Julian have a successful evening yesterday?"

Mrs. Romaine had explained to him on the previous night with forced merriment

that her son was "dining with a fellow, he says!"

"Yes, I think so!" she answered lightly. "I don't know which 'fellow' it was, you know. Well, then, I will send you a note."

They had moved out into the hall as they talked, and now as she paused at the foot of the stairs he shook hands again, and went out of the house as she turned and went up to the drawing - room. Dennis Falconer was standing waiting by the fire.

"Most punctual of men!" she said airily as they shook hands. "How do you do?"

Dennis Falconer had by this time had five months of inaction and ill-health, and the fact that he was heartily weary of both by no means served to soften the natural tendency of his manner towards reserve and severity. In settling down to London life for the winter, too, the fact that he was no longer a new lion gave an added tinge of monotony to existence for him, honestly unconscious as he was of this truth. The days went very heavily with him; he was conscious of having come to a dreary bit of his life's journey, and he endured it con-

scientiously — if with rather self-conscious self-respect. An added gravity and silence seemed to him under the circumstances by no means to be deprecated.

Under these circumstances the contrast between him and Mrs. Romaine as they exchanged the trivialities of the situation was inexpressible, and it was not surprising that they touched almost instantly upon the business which was the cause of their interview. It was not a long affair; it turned upon Mrs. Romaine's desire to have rather more ready money at her command; and Dennis Falconer, having explained the situation to her; having stated his views, evidently conscientiously compelled thereto; and having entered a formal protest against her instructions; returned to his pocket the notebook to which he had been referring as if to emphasize the close of the matter. Then he paused.

Mrs. Romaine had drawn a quick, slight breath of relief at his action, but the breath seemed to suspend itself for an instant on this pause, and the eyes with which she watched his were very bright and intent.

“As your only near relative,” he began with formal gravity, “and as your son’s only near relative, I feel myself bound to take this opportunity of approaching a subject which has been in my thoughts for some time. Any man of ordinary knowledge and experience of the world, having regard only to the most ordinary circumstances, would tell you that so large an allowance as you make your son is not an advisable thing for any young man.”

Mrs. Romaine had listened with her expression veiled and repressed into an intent vigilance, and as he finished a dull flush—which was none the less hot and significant because it had not the vivid intensity of the angry flush of youth—crept into her face, and her eyes glittered. Her tone as she spoke witnessed to a strong self-control, and an intense determination not to abandon her position or to lessen by one jot the distance she had set between them.

“I am sorry you think so!” she said carelessly.

“I think so, emphatically,” he returned. “I should think so for any young man. For William Romaine’s son——”

Mrs. Romaine had been gathering up some papers from the table with light, careless movements; she rose now rather suddenly but still carelessly. What seemed to him almost shameful callousness quickened Falconer into what he thought a righteous disregard for all conventionality.

He too rose, but his movement was no response to hers; rather it seemed to crush and dominate its suggestion of easy dismissal with the implacable austerity of a reality not to be put aside. He stood looking at her, forcing her, by the suddenly asserted superiority of his man's determination and mental weight, to meet his grave, condemning eyes.

"Does your son know what his father was?" he said in a low, stern voice.

He had forced down the barrier, he had annihilated the distance, and she faced him with glittering eyes, that dull flush all over her face, its mask gone.

"No!" she said, and from her hard, defiant voice, also, all artificiality had dropped away.

"He knows nothing of his danger; he

has no safeguards, and he has money at his command which would be temptation to any young man. Think what you are doing !”

For a couple of seconds they confronted one another, separated by no conventionalities, man and woman, with the common memory of a common horror between them, holding them together in spite of every obstacle which temperament and habit, mental and moral, could interpose.

Then with a tremendous effort the woman's strength reasserted itself, and by sheer force of her will she thrust away the horrible reality which he had forced upon her. She laughed.

“I really don't know what we are talking about !” she said. “I am sure you mean most kindly as to my spoilt boy's allowance, but we won't trouble to discuss it ! So good of you to take the trouble to think of it—and so unnecessary !”

For a moment Falconer gazed at her almost petrified with amazement and disgust. His perceptive and imaginative faculties had not developed with the passing of years ; his mental processes were slow ; and for all their ghastly exaggeration he accepted the careless,

shallow artificiality of her tone and manner, and the smiling unfeelingness of the rebuff she had given him, exactly as they appeared upon the surface. It was some seconds, even, before he thoroughly realised how ruthlessly and completely she had imputed to him all the attributes of a meddler; and as he did so an added distance touched the uncompromising sternness which had gradually settled down upon his face.

“I beg your pardon!” he said, and the formal, unmeaning words seemed, in their enforced condescension to her level, to carry with them a lofty condemnation which was even contempt. “Good day!” he added stiffly; and then, not seeing, apparently, the hand she extended to him with a hard, smiling “Good-bye,” he left the room.

Mrs. Romaine's face remained curiously blanched-looking all the afternoon, as though she had received some kind of shock. She spent the afternoon in paying calls, and whenever she returned alone to her carriage there crept back into her eyes—bright and eager as she talked and laughed—a certain

haunting questioning, not to be driven quite away by any simulation of gaiety.

As her afternoon's work drew to a close, her eyes were no longer quite free from it, even as she made her attractive conversation, and when she rose to bring her last visit to an end she was looking very tired. She was just shaking hands with her hostess when Mrs. Halse was announced.

To spare herself one iota of what she considered her social duty—even when that duty took the form of civility to a woman she disliked—was not Mrs. Romaine's way. With exactly the exclamation of pleasure and surprise which the situation demanded she waited, pleasantly desirous of exchanging greetings with the new-comer, while Mrs. Halse bore down vociferously upon the mistress of the house. Mrs. Halse had only very recently returned to town, and there was all the excitement of novelty about her appearance. She was a good deal louder even than usual, partly as the result of this excitement, and partly as the result of absence from town; and she had also grown con-

siderably stouter. Announcements of this fact, lamentations, and explanations mingled with her greetings of her hostess, and were still upon her lips when she turned to Mrs. Romaine.

“Abominable, isn’t it?” she said, pouring out her words as fast as they would come, and without waiting for any answers. “Such a trial! I suppose I shall have to go in for Turkish baths or something horrible of that sort. And how is everybody? How is that wicked young man of yours, Mrs. Romaine? I heard of his goings on at the Ponsonbys’! By-the-bye, do tell him that Hilda Newton is engaged to be married. So good for him! No doubt he thinks she is pining away. A very good match, too—young Compton; rich and good-looking; rather a fool, but don’t tell Master Julian that.”

Master Julian’s mother was smiling so charmingly that it was with some difficulty that Mrs. Halse, who, with the assistance of Miss Newton, had guessed the substance of the conversation which had actually taken place between the mother and son in the railway carriage during their journey from Norfolk,

had some slight difficulty in restraining the ejaculation, "Cat!"

"Really!" was the suave answer. "Miss Newton is really engaged, and so well. So glad! Such a charming girl! Yes, I'll tell Julian, certainly. His heart will be broken—temporarily. Fortunately his fancies are as ephemeral as they are numerous. Good-bye! So glad to have seen you."

She pressed Mrs. Halse's hand cordially as she spoke, and pursued her graceful way to the door.

Julian was dining out again that night, and her lonely evening apparently affected his mother's nerves. At any rate, Julian received a message the next morning—a Sunday—to the effect that she had slept badly and was resting, but would see him at lunch, and at lunch-time accordingly she appeared.

She laughed at his half-careless, half-affectionate enquiries, calling herself quite rested and quite well. And after his first enquiries as to her health, Julian relapsed into rather moody silence—silence with which his mother had apparently nothing to do. That tone of independence which had come to him,

and which was sometimes hardly perceptible, could hardly have been more strongly evidenced than by his one or two spasmodic efforts to pass out of his own life—where something was evidently not to his liking—into the life they shared.

Such a state of things is always more or less disturbing to the mental atmosphere; more or less according to the sensitiveness of the person upon whom it acts; and as Mrs. Romaine sat opposite Julian the furtive glances which she cast at his moody, pre-occupied face became more and more anxious and restless. A tentative, uncertain tone in her manner of dealing with him, which had developed during the last month, increased moment by moment; and her voice and laugh as she chatted to him—ignoring his indifferent reception of her little bits of news—became moment by moment more forced and unreal. That her nerves and her self-control were not so reliable as they had once been was evident in the fact that she took refuge—as was not unusual with her in these days—in painful exaggeration.

Her bright little flow of talk stopped at

last, however ; and Julian making no attempt to fill the gap, there was total silence. It was broken again by Mrs. Romaine, and she was talking now, evidently, for talking's sake, as though she was no longer capable of weighing her words ; but, in her intense desire to penetrate the vague atmosphere which she could not challenge, was making her advances blindly.

“ I met Mrs. Halse yesterday,” she began gaily. “ Did I tell you ? Fortunately I only encountered her for a few moments, or I doubt whether I should be alive to tell the tale.”

She paused, and Julian smiled absently. They had finished lunch, and he had risen and strolled to the fire with a cigarette, and he was thinking vaguely, as her voice broke in upon his meditations — or perhaps rather feeling than thinking—that his mother was rather artificial. All society women were artificial, he had thought once or twice lately ; and the word was acquiring a new significance to him.

“ She bestowed an immense amount of conversation upon me in the course of those

few minutes!" continued Mrs. Romaine in the sprightly tone which her son was beginning to hear for the first time as something jarring. "Amongst other things she told me a little piece of news which will interest you."

"Yes?" said Julian indifferently.

A fellow didn't always want to be entertained, he was saying to himself irritably; it was a nuisance. His thoughts had wandered completely, and he was going over a fruitless hour which he had spent alone walking up and down a certain side-street off Piccadilly, on the previous evening—an hour which was accountable for his gloomy humour this morning—when he became aware of his mother's voice saying with insistent gaiety:

"Well, sir, aren't you broken-hearted?"

Julian started and made a futile effort to realise what his mother had said. The necessity for the effort and its failure proved by no means soothing to him, and he said rather impatiently:

"I'm awfully sorry, mother, but I'm afraid I didn't hear."

"He didn't hear!" echoed Mrs. Romaine

in mock appeal to heaven and earth to witness the fact. She, too, had made an effort and a failure, and the result with her was to increase her nervous recklessness. "Five weeks ago he was ready to eat his poor little mother because she prevented his proposing to this young woman, and now when I tell him she's engaged he doesn't even hear! Perhaps you've forgotten Hilda Newton's very existence, my lord! Who is her successor?"

Julian flushed angrily, and his good-looking face took a sullen expression.

"She's not likely to have a successor, as you call it," he said. "A fellow doesn't care to have that kind of thing happen twice."

His mother broke into a thin, nervous laugh.

"You don't mean to say it rankles still!" she said gaily. "Is this the reason of your devotion to work and 'fellows'? You silly old boy, you ought to be thoroughly glad of your escape by this time! I think I shall follow Dennis Falconer's advice, and cut down your allowance to teach you reason. Shall I?"

The jest, dragged in as it was, had a forced

ring about it ; perhaps it bore all-unconscious testimony to the oppressively insistent power of that haunting questioning of yesterday. But Julian, knowing nothing of this, was simply conscious of ever-increasing irritation from her voice and manner.

“ I don’t see what business my allowance is of Dennis Falconer’s ! ” he said gruffly. And then side by side with his growing sense of his mother’s artificiality, there grew in him an overmastering desire for another woman’s presence—a simple presence, to which social subtleties and affectation were unknown. Why hadn’t Clemence met him yesterday evening ? How could he tell when he would see her again ? To-morrow he could not meet her. Then his reflections paused, as it were, absorbed in a vague sense of discomfort and discontent, until a fresh thought stole across them ; a thought which presented itself by no means for the first time that day.

Why should he not go and see her this afternoon ? After all, why should he not ? He never had done such a thing, but—did it mean so much as it seemed to mean ? And if it did ? Why not ?

"I don't see either," his mother said; and Julian smiled grimly as he thought how little she knew the question she was answering. "It's our business, isn't it? And it's my private business to find you a nice wife—not yours at all, you understand." These last words with a laugh. "She must be pretty, I suppose—good style at any rate—and she must be rich, and she must have the makings of a good hostess in her. Really, I think I must begin to look her out. Don't you think——"

Julian interrupted her. He was hardly conscious that he was doing so; he had hardly heard her words; but the atmosphere of the perfectly appointed room, with its artificial mistress, had suddenly become absolutely intolerable to him, and he had answered his own question suddenly and recklessly.

"I'm going out, mother," he said. "I've got some calls to make, and it's getting late. You won't go out this afternoon, I know. Good-bye."

He was gone almost before she had realised that he was going.

To Mrs. Romaine it was a repetition of their first evening at home together in the autumn. The nervous excitement under which she had been acting died suddenly away, and she realised what had happened ; realised it, and sat for a moment staring at it, as it were, her hands clenched on the tablecloth, her face haggard and drawn.

To Julian it was no repetition. It was a new departure, sudden and unpremeditated, and as he walked away from his mother's house his face was alight and eager with excitement and determination.

CHAPTER III

ON finding himself condemned to twelve months in London, Dennis Falconer had debated the question of where he should live at some length; and had finally decided on returning to some rooms in the neighbourhood of the Strand, in which he had been wont to establish himself during his temporary residences in London for the past fifteen years. It was not a fashionable part of London. Falconer was a richer man now than he had been fifteen years before, and there were sundry luxuries to be had in those quarters of London where wealthy bachelors congregate, which were not recognised so far south of Piccadilly. It was also natural to him to think twice before he abandoned the idea of living where it was "the proper thing"—of the hour—to live. But he was known and

respected in his old rooms; he would be received there with deferential delight; he would be of the first importance in his landlady's estimation; and these things, little as he knew it, had a distinct influence on his decision.

The two rooms which he occupied, on the first floor, bore a strong likeness to the majority of first-floor rooms in the same street, occupied by single gentlemen. These gentlemen were not, as a rule, of the class who think it worth while to impress their artistic character upon the room in which they live; as a whole, indeed, they might have been said to lack artistic character. Here and there was a more inveterate smoker, newspaper-reader, or novel-reader, as the case might be, the sign manual of whose tastes was not to be obliterated. But as a rule it was the landlady's taste that reigned supreme and monotonous.

Dennis Falconer's rooms were no exception to the rule. The furniture was very comfortable, very solid, and very ugly, in the style of thirty years ago; an artistic temperament would have modified the whole appearance of the room, insensibly and necessarily,

in the course of a week. But Falconer was not even conscious that anything was wrong. He was as nearly devoid of æsthetic sense, even on its broadest lines, as it is possible for a civilised man to be ; and the state of mind which takes pleasure in the tone of curtains and carpets, and the form of tables, chairs, or china, was to him incomprehensible, and consequently a little contemptible.

On a November morning, with an incipient yellow fog hanging about, the appearance of the room in which breakfast was waiting for him was calculated to cast a gloom over a temperament never so little open to such influences ; and Dennis Falconer as he opened his bedroom door and came slowly out, looked as though his mental atmosphere was already sufficiently heavy. He always breakfasted punctually at nine o'clock, and he never went to bed before one ; it simply never occurred to him to make any concession to the emptiness of his present life by spending more than seven hours out of the twenty-four in sleep, even if he had been physically able to do so. And there were days when the intervening seventeen hours hung on his hands with an

almost unendurable weight. He had never been a man who readily made friends, and his tendency in this direction had steadily decreased as he grew older, so that the few men with whom he was intimate were friends of his early manhood; and, as it happened, none of these intimates were in England at the moment. He was absolutely incapable of forming those cheery, unmeaning acquaintanceships which make the savour of life to so many unoccupied men. He was one of those men with whom no one thinks of becoming familiar; who is vaguely supposed either to have a private and select circle of friends, or to be sufficient for himself; whose demeanour, correct, self-contained, and a trifle formal, seems to hold the world at a distance. Consequently his intercourse with his fellow-creatures was limited by his present life to slight conversation on the topics of the day at his club, or in various drawing-rooms where he paid grave, stiff calls, or attended stately functions. Cut off from his own particular work he had no interests and no pursuits.

It was a dreary life in truth, and it was little wonder that Falconer's expression grew

rather more austere with every week. The sentiments of a man of his temperament towards a world in which there seemed so little place for him, and from which he could derive so little satisfaction, would inevitably tend towards stern disapproval.

On this particular morning the sense of dreariness was very heavy upon him. On the previous day he had had an interview with the great doctor to whose fiat he owed his detention in London. The great doctor had been indefinite and unsatisfactory; had looked grave and talked vaguely about troublesome complications and a possible necessity of complete repose. Falconer had made no sign of discomposure, had taken his leave with his usual courteous gravity, and had left the consulting-room with a cold chill at his heart. The cold chill was about it still this morning as he walked to his window before going to the breakfast-table, and stood there looking blankly out. What he was really looking at was the prospect before him if, as the doctor had hinted, he should have to lie up for a time. A lodging and a nurse, or a hospital; solitude and confinement in either case.

He sighed heavily, and turning as though with the instinct to turn away from his troubles, he sat down to the table, poured out his coffee, and took up the letters lying by his plate. There were only two—one in a common-looking envelope directed in an illiterate hand, the other in a clear, characteristic man's hand, at the sight of which his face brightened perceptibly.

"Aston," he said to himself, and opened it quickly.

His friendship for the little doctor, which time had only served to strengthen, was, perhaps, the most genial sentiment of Dennis Falconer's life, and Dr. Aston's absence in India at this particular period had been a bitter disappointment to him. He had hoped for some time that the doctor's plans—always of a somewhat erratic nature—might bring him back to London shortly; and as his eyes fell on the first sentence of the letter a slight sound of intense relief escaped him; an eloquent testimony to his present loneliness. Dr. Aston began by telling him that he would be in England before Christmas.

The letter was long and interesting; it

abounded in bits of vivid description and shrewd observation, and its comments on Falconer's proceedings were keen and kindly. Its recipient allowed himself to become absorbed in it to the total neglect of his breakfast, and his expression was lighter than it had been for weeks when he came upon these sentences towards the close of the letter :

“By-the-bye, in the ‘latest intelligence’ of London society—all is fish in the shape of human nature that comes to my net, as you know, and I study that curious institution carefully whenever I get the chance—I constantly, nowadays, come across the name of a Mrs. Romaine. ‘The charming Mrs. Romaine and her good-looking son’ is the usual formula. It is not by any chance the little woman with whom I got myself and you into such a terrible fix years and years ago at Nice—William Romaine’s widow? Is it any relation? I should like to know what became of that little woman, if you can tell me; she had stuff in her. And whether the boy has dreed his weird yet?”

Falconer laid down the letter abruptly, and turned to his breakfast, his face stern and

uncompromising. His interview with Mrs. Romaine, now a fortnight old, had accentuated markedly his grim disapprobation of her; and the strong feeling of reprobation that stirred him then had so little subsided that the least touch was enough to re-endow it with vigorous life.

"Stuff in her!" he muttered, with a world of contempt in the curt ejaculation. "Stuff in her! If Aston only knew!"

He glanced at the letter again, and a certain disapproval, personal to the writer, expressed itself in the grave set of his lips as he re-read the words about Julian; his whole mental and moral attitude was antagonistic to, and inclined to condemn, what he characterised, now, as "Aston's dangerous theories." He passed with what seemed to him practical sense from "Aston's extravagance" to a stern consideration of the heinousness of such a life and education as Julian's for a young man in Julian's position. Julian's position, rightly considered, involved in his eyes a reaping in obscurity, humility, and sombreness of life of the harvest of shame and disgrace which his father had sown; and that

there was anything inconsistent between this view of the case and his condemnation of Dr. Aston's theories he was utterly unaware.

He applied himself to his breakfast, still meditating on Mrs. Romaine and the probable consequences of her callousness; and then he took up the other letter and opened it.

At the opening of his last expedition, one of the men attached to it had met with a disabling accident, and had been sent home. The man had been with Falconer on a previous expedition, and when the latter returned to England he had made enquiries about him, and had finally, and with no little difficulty, traced him out to find him crippled for life, and in a state of abject poverty. Falconer, according to his narrow and orthodox lights, as strictly conventional in their way as were Mrs. Romaine's in hers, was a good man. The letter he was reading now, from the wife of this man, was written by a woman by whom he was regarded as a kind of Providence; to be revered indeed, not loved, but to be revered with all her heart. She and her husband had been

rescued by him from despair ; all that medical skill could do for the man had been done at his expense. The pair had been settled by him in a small house in Camden Town, where Mrs. Dixon, a brisk, capable woman, was to let lodgings. To this house Falconer had been once or twice to see the crippled man ; and he was not now surprised to receive from the wife the information—conveyed in a style in which natural loquacity struggled with awe of her correspondent—that the husband had had one of the bad attacks of suffering to which he was liable, and that if Mr. Falconer could spare half an hour, Dixon would “take it very kind with his duty.”

Falconer smiled grimly at the words “if Mr. Falconer could spare half an hour.” His whole day was practically at Dixon’s disposal. He would go up to Camden Town that afternoon, he decided ; he almost wished he had thought of going before, and as the thought crossed his mind, the remembrance of what might possibly be lying in wait for himself in the not very distant future made him rise abruptly and thrust his letters into his pocket.

It was about twelve o'clock when he left his rooms and walked slowly away in the direction of club-land. He usually got through an hour or so at his club before lunch, reading the papers and so forth. The threatening fog of three hours earlier had rolled away, and there were gleams of wintry sunshine about which made walking pleasant. Dr. Aston's letter had cheered Falconer considerably; the feeling, too, that he had a definite occupation for his afternoon, and an occupation which was not invented, was invigorating; and altogether he was in better spirits than he had been for many a day. He was walking up Waterloo Place, when his eyes, which could not forego, even in a London street, their trained habits of keen, accurate observation, lighted on Marston Loring, who was coming down Waterloo Place on the opposite side of the road. Loring was a man Dennis Falconer particularly disliked, and after one disapproving glance he was looking away, when he saw the other suddenly stop with a movement—and evidently an exclamation—of surprise and welcome. In the same instant he became aware that Julian Romaine had turned out of

a side-street, and was greeting his friend apparently with effusion. Falconer's brow clouded involuntarily. The instinct of kin was so strong in him that there was a certain touch of personal feeling, little as he wished it, in his connection with the Romaynes, which made the thought of them particularly disagreeable to him; and here, for the second time to-day, the young man and his mother were forced upon his notice. He pursued his way up the street, watching Julian grimly, and as he passed, still on the opposite pavement, the corner where the two young men were standing, Julian happened to look across, saw him, and made a ready, courteous gesture of salutation. Falconer returned it stiffly enough, and walked on.

Julian turned to Loring with a laugh.

"Old bear!" he said; "I wish he'd take himself off to Africa or somewhere. He's a regular wet blanket to have about! Well, old fellow, and what's the news?"

Julian was looking very fresh, vigorous, and full of life. There was a curious suggestion about him of alertness which was not without a certain excitement; and his tone

and manner as he spoke were almost superabundantly frank and loquacious.

Ten days before, Loring had received a note from Mrs. Romaine telling him that Julian was going for a week's holiday to Brighton, and that the alteration in his room must be completed if possible in his absence. "It is a sudden idea with him, apparently," she had written; "but do let us take advantage of it."

If Loring had had his own private notion on the subject of this sudden idea on Julian's part he had made no sign to Julian's mother; he had paid, in silence, his cynical tribute to the maternal wisdom which had presumably recognised the fact that if freedom is not granted it will be snatched.

Three days had now passed since Julian's return, but it had happened—he himself could perhaps have told how—that until this Saturday afternoon he and Loring had not met. There was nothing in his face and manner at this moment, however, but the most lively, even demonstrative satisfaction; and without giving Loring time to answer his question he went on, with an ease and

gaiety which were very like, and yet unlike, his mother.

"Where were you off to? The club? Come and have some lunch with me, do! I want to tell you how first-rate I think my room. I hear you've taken no end of trouble over it. It was awfully jolly of you, old man!"

"Glad you like it," returned Loring nonchalantly. "Yes, I think it's nice. But it was Mrs. Romaine who took the trouble."

He was studying Julian keenly, though quite imperceptibly, as he spoke. The young man's manner was assumed—of that Loring was quite aware. But what, exactly, did it hide? What exactly was the secret?

He debated this question calmly with himself throughout the lunch which they took together a little later on; interposing question and remarks the while into Julian's flow of fluent talk and laughter. About Brighton, in particular, Julian was full of chatter; and as he wound up a vivacious description of his doings there, Loring commented mentally:

"He hasn't been to Brighton at all!"

Aloud he said, as genially as nature ever allowed him to speak :

“ Well, it’s very jolly to see you back again, my boy. Do you know we’ve seen next to nothing of one another lately, and I vote we turn over a new leaf, eh ? What are you going to do this afternoon, now ? ”

He was leaning back in his chair lighting a cigarette as he spoke, and apparently his attention was wholly claimed by the process ; as a matter of fact, however, he was studying Julian’s face intently, and his sense of annoyance was not untinged with admiration when not a muscle of that good-looking face moved. Julian leant back and crossed his legs airily.

“ I promised to go to the Eastons’, I’m sorry to say ! ” he said. “ It’s an awful bore ! We might have done a theatre together ! ”

Now, the Eastons were mutual acquaintances of the two men, but it so happened that they had taken irremediable offence against Loring over some detail connected with the bazaar, and it was no longer possible for him to call upon them. Julian was of course aware

of the fact, and Loring smiled cynically at what he recognised as a very clever move.

“A pity!” he said composedly. “Better luck another time. Well, you’re not in any hurry, anyway.”

“Not a bit!” assented Julian, cheerfully disposing of himself in a most comfortable and stationary attitude. But a moment later he sprang to his feet. “By Jove!” he exclaimed, “I nearly forgot! I’ve got a commission to do for my mother in Bond Street—shop closes at two. Can I do it?”

A hurried reference to his watch assured him that he would just do it, and with a hasty farewell he dashed out of the room. Loring did not propose to accompany him. It was not worth while, he told himself; and he smiled sardonically as Julian departed.

“I shall find out,” he said to himself. “Of course I shall find out! The question is, is it worth while to wait, or shall I play my game with what I know? The attached friend of the boy warning his mother in time”—he smiled again very unpleasantly—“or the sympathising friend of the mother having made

a terrible discovery ! Which is the better pose ? The latter, I think. Yes, the latter ! I'll wait until I've made my discovery."

He dropped the end of his cigarette into an ash-tray, sat for a moment more in deep thought, and then rose and strolled slowly away.

CHAPTER IV

JULIAN, meanwhile, hailed a passing hansom, sprang into it, and told the man to drive, not to Bond Street but to the Athenæum, Camden Town. There was an air about him as of one who plumes himself on having done a clever thing, and as he settled himself for his long drive there was a curious excitement and radiance in his face. When the cab reached its destination at last he jumped out and walked rapidly and eagerly away.

It was not a neighbourhood likely to be familiar to a young man about town, but Julian pursued his way with the certainty of a man who had followed it several times before. In about ten minutes he turned into a neat and respectable little street, consisting of two short rows of small houses

with diminutive bow windows to the first-floor rooms. About half-way down he stopped at a house on the right-hand side and knocked with a quick, decided touch. He was an object of the deepest interest as he stood upon the little doorstep to a brisk, curious-looking woman who was standing in the ground-floor window of the house opposite, but her opportunity for observation was brief. The door was opened almost immediately, and with a pleasant greeting to the woman, who stood aside, he passed her and ran upstairs—a course of action evidently expected of him. He opened the door of the front room on the first floor and went eagerly in.

“Here I am!” he cried. “Did you expect me so soon?”

Standing in the middle of the room, as though she had suddenly started from her chair, with her hands outstretched towards him, was Clemence; and on the third finger of that thin, left hand there shone a bright gold ring.

Her face was a delicate rosy red, as though with sudden joy just touched with

shyness, and all the beauty which had been latent in her tired, work-worn face seemed to have been touched into vivid, almost startling life, by the hand of a great magician. By contrast with the face she turned to Julian now, the large eyes deep and glowing, the mouth trembling a little with tenderness, the face of a month ago, pure and sweet as it had been, would have looked like the inanimate mask of a dormant soul. The soul was awake now, quivering with consciousness; womanhood had come with a purity and beauty beyond any possibility of girlhood. Looking at her face now, it was easy to see by what means alone the latent strength of her character might be developed.

He drew her into his arms with an eager, confident touch, and she yielded to him completely, clinging to him with the colour deepening in her face as he kissed it boyishly again and again. It was a fortnight only since he had kissed her first.

"I was watching for you," she said softly. "I heard your step."

He laughed exultantly and kissed her again.

"I thought you'd be watching!" he said. "Though I'm earlier than I told you, do you know? Much earlier! I say, Clemence, how jolly the room looks!"

It was a small room, furnished and decorated in the simplest and cheapest style; as great a contrast as could well be imagined to the rooms to which he was accustomed. But it was very clean and very comfortable-looking; and there was a homelike, restful atmosphere about it which might well have radiated from the slender figure in the plain dress, with that shining wedding-ring and lovely, flushing face. She smiled, a very sweet, pleased little smile.

"Do you think so really?" she said. "I am so glad. It is that beautiful basket-chair you sent, and the flowers." She glanced as she spoke at a pot of chrysanthemums standing on a little table in the window. Then she turned to him again, her eyes a little deprecating. "Do you think you ought to spend so much money?" she said shyly.

Julian laughed, and flung his arm round her, as he surveyed the little room with a vivid air of proprietorship. Here he was master. Here his word was law. Here he was in a world of his own making, and his only fellow-creature was his subject.

"It looks jolly!" he pronounced again as a final dictum. "Now, come and sit down, Clemence, and tell me what you've been doing since yesterday!" He settled himself into the arm-chair by the fire with a lordly air as he spoke, adding: "Come and sit on this stool by me, like the sweetest girl in the world."

Clemence hesitated, hardly perceptibly. Hers was a nature to which trivial endearments came strangely, almost painfully. She had not yet learned to caress in play; and there was an innate, unconscious, personal dignity about her to which trivial self-abasement was unnatural. But almost before she was conscious of her reluctance there swept over her, like a great wave of hot sweetness, the remembrance that she was his wife! It was her duty to do as he wished. She came softly across the room,

sat down on the stool he had drawn out, and laid her cheek against his arm.

It was a trivial action, very quietly performed, but it was instinct with the beauty of absolute self-abnegation; and as if, as her physical presence touched him, something of her spirit touched him too, a sudden quiet fell upon the exultant, self-satisfied boy at whose feet she sat. Not for the first time, by any means, there stole over Julian a vague uneasiness; a vague realisation of something beyond his ken; something in the light of which he shrank, unaccountably, from himself. His hand closed round the woman's hand lying in his with a touch very different from the boyish passion of his previous caresses, and for a moment he did not speak. Then he said slowly and in a low, dreamy voice:

"Clemence, I can't think why you should ever have loved me!"

The hand in his thrilled slightly, and the head on his shoulder was just shaken. Clemence could not tell him why she loved him. The bald outline she could trace as most women can trace it. She could look

back upon her first sense of reliance, her pity, her admiration, her sense of strange, delightful companionship; but the why and wherefore of it, the mystery which had given to this young man and no other the key of her soul, this was to her as a miracle; as, indeed, there is always something miraculous in it, even when it seems most natural. To account for love; to say that in this case it is natural, in this case it is unnatural; is to confess ignorance of the first great attribute of love — that it is supernatural and divine.

There was another silence, a longer one this time, and the strange spell sank deeper into Julian's spirit. He said nothing. It would have been a relief to him to speak; to reduce to words, or, indeed, to definite consciousness, the vague trouble that oppressed him; but its outlines were too large and too vague for him. It was in truth a sense of total moral insolvency, but he could not understand it as such, having no moral standpoint. Clemence neither moved nor spoke; her hand lay motionless in his; her cheek rested against him; her beautiful eyes

looked straight before them with a dreamy, almost awestruck gaze.

At last, with a desperate determination to thrust away so unusual an oppression, Julian moved slightly and began to talk. He wanted to get back his sense of superiority, and his voice accordingly took its most boyish and masterful tone.

"You haven't told me what you've been doing, Clemence?" he said. "Have you given notice at your bonnet shop as I told you?"

Clemence lifted her head and sat up, clasping her hands lightly on the arm of his chair.

"No!" she said gently. "I thought I would ask you to think about it again. I would so much rather go on if you didn't mind. For one thing, what could I do all day?" She looked up into his face as she spoke with deprecating, pleading eyes, which were full of submission, too; and the submission was very pleasant to Julian.

"I do mind," he said authoritatively. "I can't have it, Clemence. I can't always see you home, don't you see, and I won't

have you about at night alone. Besides, I don't choose that you should work."

"But I do so want to!" she said, laying her hand timidly and beseechingly on his. "It will be so difficult for you to keep us both; you will overwork yourself, I'm so afraid. Oh, won't you let me help? I've always worked, you know; it doesn't hurt me. You don't want to forget that you've married a work-girl, do you?"

She smiled at him as she spoke, one of her sweet, rare smiles, and he kissed her impetuously.

"Don't talk nonsense!" he said imperiously. "I can't allow it, and that's all about it. How do you suppose I could attend to my work when I'm kept at the hospital in the evening, if I were thinking all the time of you alone in the streets! No, you must give notice on Monday!"

She looked at him wistfully for a moment. He was condemning her to long days of idleness, to constant uneasiness and self-reproach on his behalf, to a certain loss of self-respect. But self-sacrifice was instinctive with her.

“Very well!” she said simply.

The little victory, the assertion of authority restored Julian’s spirits completely, and he plunged into discursive talk; more or less egotistical. It was all, necessarily, founded on falsehood, and it would have been a delicate question to decide when his talk ceased to be consciously untruthful, and became the expression of a fictitious Julian in whom the real Julian absolutely believed.

The afternoon wore on; the winter twilight fell, bringing with it a slight return of the fog of the morning; two hours had passed before Julian moved reluctantly, and said that he must go.

“I shall come to-morrow!” he said, taking her face between his hands and kissing it. “We’ll go out into the country if it’s fine. I wish it were summer-time! Have you ever seen the river, Clemence?”

“Not in the country,” she said. “It must be nice! How much you’ve seen! Do you know I often think that you must wish sometimes I was a lady! I don’t know anything and I haven’t seen anything, and

——” she faltered, and he rose, laughing and drawing her up into his arms.

“Any one can know things,” he said lightly, “and any one can see things. But no one but you can be Clemence! Do you see? Oh, what a bore it is to have to go!”

He was lingering, undecidedly, as though a little pressure would have scattered his resolution to the winds, and seated him once more in the chair he had just quitted. But, since he had said that he must go, it never occurred to Clemence to ask him to stay. If it were not his duty he would never leave her. If it was his duty now, how could she hold him back!

“To - morrow will come!” she said, looking into his face with a brave smile.

“I don’t believe you want me to stay!” he returned, half laughing, half vexed.

“Don’t I?” she said simply, and he caught her in his arms again.

“What a shame!” he said. “There, good-bye! Are you coming to the door?”

She shook her head.

“I’ll stay here,” she said, “and watch

you from the window. I see you farther so. Ah, it's rather foggy! I'm so sorry! You'll look up? Good-bye!"

She lifted her face to his and kissed him tenderly and shyly, and he left her standing by the window.

Julian ran downstairs, let himself out, and stood for a moment on the doorstep as he realised the disagreeable nature of the atmosphere. At the same instant the door of the house opposite opened, and a man came out, attended to the threshold by a woman. She caught sight of Julian instantly, and said something to the man, as he stood in the shadow, in a deferential whisper. Julian shook himself, confounded the fog, and then glanced up at the window from which the light streamed on his face. He waved his hand, turned away, and walked rapidly down the street, pulling up his coat collar as he went.

As he went, Dennis Falconer slowly descended the two steps of that opposite house, and slowly—very slowly—followed him.

CHAPTER V

“GOOD-BYE! So glad to have seen you! What, dear Mrs. Ponsonby, are you going to run away too? So kind of you to come out on such an afternoon! Good-bye!”

It was a Friday afternoon, and Friday was Mrs. Romaine's “day.” This particular Friday had been about as unpleasant, atmospherically, as it is possible for even a November day to be, short of actual dense fog; it had been very dark, and a drizzling rain—a dirty rain too—had fallen unceasingly. Under these circumstances it was rather surprising that any one should have ventured out, even in the most luxurious brougham, than that Mrs. Romaine's visitors should have been comparatively few in number.

The departure of the ladies to whom her

farewells had been spoken, and with whom she had been exchanging social commonplaces for the last quarter of an hour, left her alone ; and as she returned to her chair by the dainty tea-table and poured herself out a cup of tea, she had apparently very little expectation of further callers, though it was only just past five o'clock ; for when the door-bell rang a few minutes later she paused, and a look of surprise crossed her face. She put down her cup with a little sigh, which was more a concession made to the dictum of conventionality that callers are a bore than an expression of real feeling ; and then, as the door opened, she rose with a touch of genuine satisfaction.

“My dear Mrs. Pomeroy !” she exclaimed. “How sweet of you to come out on such a shocking day ! Really, you must have had an intuition of my forlorn condition, I think ! Maud, dear, how are you ?”

She had given her left hand to the girl in a familiar, caressing way as she retained Mrs. Pomeroy's right hand, and now she drew the elder lady with charming insistence towards a large, inviting-looking chair, indicating to the

daughter with a pretty gesture that she was to take a low seat near the table.

“It is an ill wind that blows no one any good!” she continued gaily, as Mrs. Pomeroy greeted her placidly. “It is really too delightful to get you all to myself like this! How seldom one gets the chance of a cosy chat! And how very seldom it comes with the people of all others with whom one would thoroughly enjoy it! You’ll have some tea, won’t you—oh, yes, you really must; it is so much more friendly!” She laughed as she spoke, and turned to the girl sitting demurely on the low seat near her with a tacit claim on her sympathy and comprehension which was very fascinating. Miss Pomeroy’s pretty, expressionless lips smiled sweetly, and her mother, who was always ready to yield to pressure where a cup of tea was concerned—that soothing beverage being forbidden her by her medical authorities—answered contentedly:

“Well, thanks, yes! I think I will! One really wants a cup of tea on a day like this, doesn’t one?” Mrs. Pomeroy had rarely been known to leave a statement unqualified

by a question. "It is really very disagreeable weather, isn't it? Not that it seems to trouble you at all." Mrs. Pomeroy smiled one of her slow, amiable smiles as she spoke. "I am so glad to see you looking so much better!"

Mrs. Romaine laughed.

"I am very well indeed, thanks," she said. "But I've not been ill that I know of, dear Mrs. Pomeroy."

Mrs. Pomeroy shook her head gently.

"I thought, do you know, when I first came home, that you looked as though your holiday had been a little too much for you—so many people's holiday is a little too much for them, don't you think? And how is your boy? Very hard at work, we hear."

Mrs. Romaine smiled.

Mrs. Pomeroy's opinion as to her looks had been quite correct; and it was only within the last fortnight that they had altered for the better. Within that fortnight her brightness and vivacity had ceased to be—as they had been for weeks before—wholly artificial; something of the look of nervous strain had gone out of her eyes, and her face was altogether less sharpened. Her smile now was

genuine ; and her voice was strangely tender and contented.

"Very hard," she said. "I have had to get used to a great deal of absence on his part. He has gone down to Brighton to-day, until Monday ; he needs a little fresh air, of course. It is so long since he has been shut up as he is now."

"You must miss him very much," said Mrs. Pomeroy placidly.

Mrs. Romaine did not answer directly, except with a laugh.

"I am almost inclined to envy mothers with daughters," she said, smiling at Miss Pomeroy again. "I wonder, now"—a sudden idea had apparently struck Mrs. Romaine—"I wonder whether you would lend me your daughter now and then, and I wonder whether she would consent to be lent."

"I should be delighted," said Mrs. Pomeroy, with vague amiability, and an equally vague glance at her daughter. "And I'm sure Maud will be delighted, too, won't you, Maud?"

"Delighted!" assented Maud, with pretty promptitude.

“Well, then, we must arrange it some time or other,” declared Mrs. Romaine gaily. “Perhaps you would come and spend a week with me, Maud—that would be charming!”

But she did not press the point, letting the subject drop with apparent carelessness, and talking about other things, always keeping the girl in the conversation; turning to her now and then with a pleasant, familiar word, or a gesture which was lightly affectionate. The mother and daughter had risen to take leave when she said carelessly :

“Oh, by-the-bye, Maud, dear, have you anything to do to-morrow afternoon? I’ve been bothered into taking two tickets for a *matinée*, a charity affair, you know, but they say it will be rather good. It would be so nice of you to come with me!”

“It will be very nice of you to take me!” was the response. “Thank you very much!”

A minute or two more passed in the arrangement of the place and hour for meeting, and then Mrs. Pomeroy drifted blandly out of the room, followed by her daughter, and Mrs. Romaine was again alone.

She walked to the fireplace this time, and putting one foot on the fender, stood looking down, her face intent and satisfied.

“Just the right sort of girl!” she said to herself. “Just the right sort of girl!”

She was wearing the little gold bangle which Julian had given her on her birthday—the one which Miss Pomeroy had helped him to choose—and she was turning it on her wrist with tender, contemplative touches. She was so absorbed in her reflection that she did not hear the servant come into the room, or notice for the moment that the girl was standing beside her with a letter. She started at last, and looked up; took the letter, and opened it carelessly, without looking at it, as the woman took away the tea-table.

“DEAR COUSIN HERMIA,

“Unless I hear from you to the contrary, I propose to call on you to-morrow (Saturday), at three o’clock, on a matter of grave importance.

“Faithfully yours,

“DENNIS FALCONER.”

Mrs. Romaine's face had changed slightly as she began to read—changed and hardened—and as she finished she drew the letter through her fingers with a gesture of mere impatience, which was somehow belied by the look in her eyes. Something of that strained look had come back into them. She could not see him to-morrow, she was saying to herself briefly; she was not going to put off Maud Pomeroy; Dennis Falconer must fix another time, and she would write him a line at once. She walked quickly across to her writing table, sat down, drew out a sheet of paper and took up a pen.

And then she paused.

Ten minutes later her note was written, and on its way to the post, but it was not directed to Dennis Falconer. It began, "My dear Maud," and it told Miss Pomeroy that business had "turned up" which would make it impossible for Mrs. Romaine to go to the theatre on the following afternoon, and that she enclosed the tickets hoping that Maud might be able to use them.

Exactly on the stroke of three on the following afternoon the door-bell rang. Mrs.

Romayne was alone in the drawing-room, apparently lazily and pleasantly enough occupied with the latest number of the latest society paper; and as the sound reached her ear her lips hardened into a thin, straight line, and her eyes flashed for a moment with a look of antagonism which was almost defiant. Then the servant announced :

“ Mr. Falconer ! ”

Dennis Falconer was looking very pale ; there was little colour even in his lips, and his face was set and stern. He took the hand Mrs. Romayne held out to him, and replied to her greeting in the briefest possible phrase, with no softening of a something curiously solemn and inexorable about his demeanour, though his eyes rested on her for an instant with a singular expression. He disliked and despised the woman before him, and yet at that moment he pitied her.

“ Sit down ! ” she said. “ I am charmed to see you, though, do you know, you have chosen an inopportune moment. I had a very pleasant engagement for this afternoon, and I nearly put you off. So I hope the business is really very grave.”

Her voice was lightness itself, and that very lightness, with the almost unusual loquacity with which she had received him, seemed to witness to the presence in her mind of a recollection which she was determined to ignore—the recollection of their last interview, in that very room. There was an air about her of having entrenched herself behind a barrier which she defied him to pass; of being resolute this time against surprise, or against any other method of attack.

“It is very grave!” said Falconer, and in contrast with her voice, his rang with stern heaviness. “I must ask you to prepare yourself for bad news!”

“Bad news!” she echoed sharply, as her eyes, fixed on his face, grew suddenly bright and keen. “Oh—money, I suppose?” Her voice jarred a little, though she spoke very lightly.

“No!” said Falconer.

His tone was absolutely uncompromising. On his unsympathetic and unimaginative mind the effect of her manner was to obliterate his sense of pity beneath a consciousness

of the retributive justice of the moment before her.

“Not money?” she said, with a little, unreal laugh. “Well, that’s a comfort, at any rate.” Her hand had clenched itself suddenly round the arm of her chair on his monosyllable, and now she paused a moment, almost as though her breath had failed her, before she said, with affected carelessness: “And if not—what?”

Her back was towards the light, and Falconer could not see her face.

“I will answer your question, if you will allow me, with another,” he said. “Have you noticed anything unusual in the course of the past month—or more—in the conduct of your son?”

In the instant’s dead silence that followed a slight creaking sound made itself audible and then died away. The clenched hand on the bar of Mrs. Romaine’s chair had passed slowly round it with such intense pressure as to produce the sound. Then she answered him, as he had previously answered her, in a monosyllable.

“No!” she said. There was a desperate

effort in her voice at carelessness, at nonchalance, at astonishment; but it was penetrated through and through with all her past antagonism towards, and defiance of, the man before her accentuated into fierce repudiation. Falconer's voice, as he answered her, seemed to confront that defiance with inexorable fate.

"That is almost unfortunate," he said sternly. "In that case, I fear that what I have to tell you must fall with double and treble severity, as coming upon you unawares. Will you not think again? Has he not been absent from home a good deal? Have his absences been satisfactorily accounted for? Have you ever proved"—he paused, laying stress upon the last word—"have you ever proved such accounts, as given by himself, correct?"

With a valiant effort, the power of which Falconer must have appreciated had he been able to penetrate beyond the ghastly artificiality of the result, Mrs. Romaine rallied her forces, and strove to throw his words back upon him; to defend and entrench herself once and for all with the only weapon

she knew. She broke into a thin, tuneless laugh.

“What an absolutely gruesome catechism!” she cried. “Really, it would take me weeks of solitary confinement and meditation among the tombs—isn’t there a book about that, by-the-bye?—before I could approach it in a duly sepulchral spirit. Do you know, it would be an absolute relief to me if you could come to the point? I am taking it for granted, you see, that there is a point, which is no doubt a compliment which its infinitesimal nature hardly deserves. Produce the poor little thing, for heaven’s sake!”

“The point is this,” said Falconer grimly and concisely. “Your son’s life, as you know it, is a lie. He has a sordid version of what is known as an ‘establishment.’ He is living with a work-girl in Camden Town.”

There was a choked, strangled sound, and Mrs. Romaine’s figure seemed to shrink together as though every muscle had contracted in one simultaneous throb. Her face, could Falconer have seen it, was rigid and blank, except for her eyes. For that first

instant she looked as a patient might look who, having suspected himself of a deadly disease, having congratulated himself on the subsidence of his symptoms and known hope, learns from his physician that that subsidence of obvious symptoms was in itself only a more dangerous symptom still, and that he is indeed doomed. Her eyes were the eyes of a woman who looks despair full in the face.

But with no human being who keeps hold of life and reason can the vivid agony of such a vision endure for more than an instant. It dulls by reason of its very insupportableness. Time is an empty word where mental suffering is concerned, and the second-hand of the tall clock in the corner had traversed its dial only once before a kind of film passed over those agonised eyes, and Mrs. Romaine spoke in a thin, hoarse voice. And the man so close to her was conscious of nothing but a short pause, and was revolted accordingly.

“How do you know?” Even in that moment the instinct of defiance of him personally could not wholly yield, and lingered in her voice.

“I have an old servant who lives in Camden Town. He is an invalid, and I occasionally visit him. His wife is a garrulous woman, and thinking that I have some claim on her gratitude, considers it necessary to inform me as to all her own and her neighbours’ affairs. Visiting the husband last Friday week, I found the wife greatly excited and alarmed for the reputation of the street—in which she lets lodgings—by the appearance in the house opposite of a couple whose relations to one another had instantly been suspected by their landlady and her neighbours, though they passed as newly-made man and wife!”

With a sudden, low cry of inexpressible horror and dismay Mrs. Romaine sprang to her feet, flinging out her hands as though to keep off something intolerable to be borne.

“No! no!” she cried breathlessly. “No! no! Not that! Not married? It would be ruin! Ruin! ruin! No! no!”

Dennis Falconer paused, freezing slowly into what seemed to him surely justifiable abhorrence of the woman before him. What

if he knew in his heart that such a marriage would indeed mean ruin to a young man? So bald a trampling down of the moral aspect of the position before the practical was not decent! It was for a woman — and that woman the young man's mother—to be overwhelmed by the moral horror to the exclusion of every other thought! And it was the practical alone that had drawn any show of emotion from Mrs. Romaine!

“I am sorry to have agitated you!” he said, and his voice was cold and cutting as steel. “I have no doubt in my own mind that they are not married. I had better perhaps continue to give you the facts in order. Chance led to my seeing the young man in question as he was leaving the house. I recognised your son. I proceeded to make enquiries. He passes as a medical student, under the name of Roden. The girl is—or was—a hand at one of the big millinery establishments. From her affectation of innocence and simplicity, the woman who has most opportunity of observing her is inclined to think the very worst of her!”

A quick, hissing breath—an unmistakeable

breath of relief—parted Mrs. Romaine's white lips. She had sunk down again in her chair and was grasping it now with both hands as she leant a little forward, trembling in every limb.

"Then it is not likely—it is not likely that he has married her," she said, in a low, rapid tone to herself rather than to Falconer, as it seemed. "Go on!"

"There is very little more to be said," returned Falconer icily. "They have occupied the rooms—that is to say, the girl has occupied them, visited every day by your son—for three weeks now. The woman has discovered that they had been somewhere in the country together for a week previously. You will, of course, be able to recall his absence from home. Yesterday he took her away into the country again; they are to return on Monday!"

He stopped; and as though she were no longer conscious of his presence, Mrs. Romaine's head was bowed slowly lower, as if under some irresistible weight, until her forehead rested on her hand, stretched out still upon the arm of her wide chair.

She lifted her face at last, white and haggard as twenty added years of life should not have made it, and rose, helping herself feebly with the arm of her chair, like a woman whose physical strength is broken. Falconer rose also. He was utterly alienated from her; he was conscious of only the most distant pity, but he felt that it was incumbent on him to say something.

“I regret very much that it should have fallen to my lot to break this to you!” he said, stiffly and awkwardly. “I fear that coming from me——” He hesitated and paused.

From out the past, confusing, almost numbing him, a vague and ghastly influence had risen suddenly upon him to strain that strange, intangible, and awful cord of common knowledge by which he and the woman before him were bound together, revolt against it or deny its presence as they might. Under the touch of that influence his last words had come from him almost involuntarily. He had not known whither they tended; he could bring them to no conclusion.

Mrs. Romaine looked him in the eyes,

holding now to a table by which she stood, but with no weakness in her ashen face. She seemed to be concentrating all her force into one final repudiation of him. She ignored his words as though he had not spoken.

"I will ask you to leave me now!" she said. And her voice, thin and toneless though it was, left her completely mistress of the situation.

She made no movement to shake hands; he hesitated a moment, then bowed and left the room.

CHAPTER VI

“It’s a jolly little place enough!”

“I think it’s lovely.”

There was a certain tone of regret, of lingering, reluctant farewell, in both voices; though in Julian’s case it was light and patronising; in Clemence’s, dreamy and tender. As Julian spoke he shifted his position slightly as he leant against the iron railing by which they stood, and let his eyes wander over the scene before them with condescending approval.

They were standing on the somewhat embryonic “sea-front” of what a few years before had been a fishing village, and was now struggling, rather inefficiently, to become a watering-place. Such season as the place could boast was entirely confined to the summer months; to the frequenters of winter resorts

it was absolutely unknown ; consequently its intrinsic charms at the moment—in all the lassitude and monotony left by departed glory—might have been considered conspicuous by their absence. But it was a glorious winter's day. A slight sprinkling of snow had been frozen on the roofs of the somewhat depressed-looking houses and on the unsightliness of the unfinished sea-front ; and brilliant sunshine, almost warm in spite of the keen, frosty air, was glorifying alike the deserted little town, the country beyond, and the sparkling, dancing sea. The frosty, invigorating brightness found a responsive chord in Julian's heart this morning ; he was not always so susceptible to such simple, natural influences. He was in a good humour with the place ; he had spent two wholly satisfactory days there — two days, moreover, which had had much the same influence upon his moral tone as a change to bracing air and simple, wholesome food would have on a physique accustomed to dissipation.

His survey ended finally with Clemence's face. She was standing at his side looking

out over the sea, her eyes intent and full of feeling, her beautiful face flushed and still, absorbed by the mysterious charm of the ceaseless movement and trouble of the bright water stretching away before her.

"What are you looking at, Clemence?" he said boyishly.

She lifted her eyes to his quite gravely and simply.

"Only the sea," she said. "It is so beautiful, I feel as if I never could leave off looking at it. It makes me feel—oh, I can't tell you, but it is like something great and strong to take away with one!" She looked away again. "Oh, I wish, I wish we need not go!" she said with a little sigh.

"I wish we needn't," returned Julian; he had been dimly conscious of something in her eyes and voice which made her previous words, simple as they seemed, almost unintelligible to him, and he caught at her last sentence as containing an idea to which he could respond. "It's an awful nuisance, isn't it? And do you know it is time we started? Never mind. We'll come down again soon!"

They stood for another moment ; Clemence looking out at the sunny sea, Julian taking another careless comprehensive view of the whole scene ; and then, as though those last looks had contained their respective farewells, they turned with one accord and walked away in the direction of the railway station. And as if in turning her back upon the sunlit sea she had turned her back also upon something less definite and tangible, a certain gravity and wistfulness crept gradually over Clemence's face as they went ; crept over it to settle down into a sadness most unusual to it as the train carried them quickly away towards London. Julian, sitting opposite her, was vaguely struck by her expression.

"Are you awfully sorry to go back, Clemence?" he said.

She started slightly, and looked at him with a faint smile.

"I suppose I am!" she said. "We have been very happy, haven't we?" There was a wistful regret in her voice which touched him somehow, and he answered her demonstratively, with a cheery and enthusiastic augury for the future. Clemence smiled

again ; again rather faintly. "I know !" she said. "I mean I hope so. Only—I don't know what's the matter with me ! I feel as if—something were finished !"

Julian broke into a boyish laugh. Her depression was by no means displeasing to him ; it was a tribute to his importance, to her dependence on him ; and the necessity for "cheering her up" implied the exercise of that superiority and authority in which he delighted.

"Why, what a dear little goose you are, Clemence !" he said, leaning forward to take her hands in his. "A 'Friday to Monday' can't last for ever, you know, but it can be repeated again and again. Why, I shall be up every day—every single day, I promise you. I shouldn't wonder if I found I could spend the evening with you to-morrow ! Won't that console you ?"

She did not answer him, but she took one of his hands in hers and pressed it to her cheek. His consolation had hardly touched that strange oppression which weighed upon her ; and Julian, in high feather, and quite unaware that only his voice was heard by her,

his words passing her by unheeded, had been talking at great length about all the happiness before them, when she said, in a hesitating, far-away voice :

“ Could you—could you come home with me this afternoon ? ”

Julian paused a moment. The question was hardly the response his words had demanded. Then he said decisively :

“ Quite impossible, I am sorry to say. I would if I could, you know, dear, but it’s quite impossible ! ”

She gave his hand a little quick pressure.

“ I know, of course ! ” she murmured gently. She paused a moment, and then said in a low voice, rather irrelevantly as it seemed : “ Julian ”—his name still came rather hesitatingly from her lips—“ do you think—do you like Mrs. Jackson ? ”

Mrs. Jackson was the name of the woman whose rooms Julian had taken for her, and he started slightly at the question.

“ She’s not a bad sort,” he said, with rather startled consideration. “ At least, she seems all right. Isn’t she nice to you, Clemence ? Don’t you like the rooms ? ”

“Oh, yes ! yes !” she said quickly, almost as though she reproached herself for saying anything that could suggest to him even a shadow of discontent on her part. “I like them so very, very much. It is only—I don’t know what exactly. Somehow, I don’t think Mrs. Jackson is quite a nice woman.” She had spoken the last words hesitatingly and with difficulty, almost as though they came from her against her will.

Julian glanced at her quickly.

“What makes you think that, Clemence ?” he said, with judicial masterfulness. “Have you any reason, I mean ?”

But Clemence was hardly able to define, even in her own pure mind, what it was that jarred upon her in her landlady’s manner ; and to Julian she was utterly unable to put her feelings into words. Her hasty disclaimer and her hesitating beginnings and falterings, however, served to remove the misgiving which had stirred him lest some knowledge of his own real life should have come to the woman’s knowledge. He was the readier to let himself be reassured and to dismiss the subject in that the train was slackening speed

for the last time before reaching London, and he intended to move into a first-class smoking carriage at the approaching station. Julian was well aware of the risks of discovery involved in these journeys with Clemence; and though he faced them nonchalantly enough, he used wits with which no one who knew him only in his capacities of man about town and budding barrister would have credited him, to reduce them to a minimum. To be seen emerging from a third-class carriage at Victoria Station was a wholly unnecessary risk to run, and he avoided it accordingly.

“You mustn’t be fanciful, Clemmie,” he said, now in a lordly and airy fashion. “I’ve no doubt Mrs. Jackson is a very jolly woman, as a matter of fact. Look here, dear, would you mind if I went and had a smoke now? It isn’t much further, you know, and one mustn’t smoke in hospital, you see!”

Clemence was very pale when he joined her on the platform at Victoria—joined her after a quick glance round to see whether he must prepare himself for an encounter with an acquaintance; and she did not speak, only looked up at him with a grave, steady smile which

made her face sadder than before. His announcement of his intention of putting her into a hansom drew from her an absolutely horrified protest. She would go in an omnibus, she told him hurriedly, or in the Underground! She had never been in a cab! It would cost so much! But when he overruled her, a little impatiently—it was not yet dark, and he did not wish to remain longer than was necessary with her in Victoria Station—she submitted timidly, with a sudden slight flushing of her cheeks.

“A four-wheeler, Julian!” she murmured pleadingly, as they emerged into the station yard. With a lofty smile at what he supposed to be nervousness on her part, he signified assent with a little condescending gesture, and stopped before a waiting cab.

“Here you are,” he said. “Jump in!”

She got in obediently, and as he shut the door she turned to him through the open window.

“Good-bye, Julian!” she said, in a low, sweet voice.

“Good-bye!” he said cheerily, smiling

at her. Her face in its dingy frame looked whiter, sweeter, and more steadfast than ever, and it made a curiously sudden and distinct impression on Julian's mental retina. Then the cab turned lumberingly round, and he moved smartly away. He did not see that as the cab turned, that sweet, white face appeared at the other window and followed him with wide, wistful eyes until the moving life of London parted them.

Julian was on his way to the club. He had a vague disinclination to the thought of going home ; the house in Chelsea was always more or less distasteful to him now, and he had no intention of going thither before it was necessary. It was nearly dark by the time his destination was reached, and as his hansom drew up a few yards from the club entrance he could only see that the way was stopped by a carriage from which two ladies and a gentleman had just emerged. It was the younger of the two ladies who glanced in his direction, and said, in a pretty, uninterested voice :

“Isn't that Mr. Romaine?”

Marston Loring was the man addressed, and he shot a keen, considering glance at the speaker—Miss Pomeroy. The fact that her eyes had noticed Julian when his quick ones had not, trivial as it was, was not without its significance to the man whose stock-in-trade, so to speak, was founded on clever estimate and appreciation of trifles. Was Miss Pomeroy not so entirely unobservant a nonentity as she was supposed to be, he asked himself, not for the first time; or was there another reason for her quickness in this instance?

“So it is!” he said. “Hullo, old fellow!”

Julian came eagerly up to the group as it paused for him on the club steps, and shook hands in his pleasantest manner with Mrs. Pomeroy.

“I do believe it’s a ladies’ afternoon!” he exclaimed gaily. “What luck for me! How do you do?” shaking hands with Miss Pomeroy. “I’d actually forgotten all about it, and I’ve only just come up from Brighton! Loring, you must ask me to join your party, old man! Tell him so, Miss Pomeroy, please!”

Whether strict veracity is to be imputed to a young man who professes unbounded satisfaction at finding fashionable "ladies' teas" in full swing at his club when he has just come off a journey is perhaps doubtful ; but Julian threw himself into the spirit of the moment with a frank gaiety and enthusiasm which was not to be surpassed. The greater number of the ladies who were sipping club tea as if it were a hitherto untasted nectar, and gazing at club furniture as though it were provision for the comfort of some strange animal, were acquaintances of his ; and as he moved about among them his passage seemed to be marked by merrier laughs, a quicker fire of the jokes of the moment, and brighter faces than prevailed elsewhere. He was enjoying himself so thoroughly, apparently, that he was unable to tear himself away, and when he left the club at last, he sprang into a hansom, and told the driver to "put the horse along." He and his mother were dining out together, and he had left himself barely sufficient time to dress.

He ran up the steps, flinging the driver his fare, let himself in with his latchkey, and

proceeded to his room up two steps at a time. When he emerged thence, twenty minutes later, in evening dress, he was congratulating himself on having "done the trick capitally, and well up to time."

He was a little surprised, therefore, as he came downstairs, to find his mother's maid waiting for him outside the drawing-room door with the information that Mrs. Romaine was already in the carriage; and he ran hastily downstairs, put on his overcoat, and proceeded to join her.

"I'm awfully sorry, dear," he said, with eager apology. "I thought it was earlier. The fact is, I was awfully late getting in. I found 'ladies' teas' going on at the club—so awfully stupid of me to forget—you might have liked to go—and it was rather good fun. How are you, dear?"

He had let himself into the brougham as he spoke, had shut the door, and seated himself by the figure he could only dimly see sitting rather back in the corner so that little or no light fell on the face. He had kissed his mother, hardly stemming the flood of his eloquence for the purpose; and he now hardly

waited for her word or two of reply before he plunged once more into eager, amusing talk. He did not give his mother time to do more than answer monosyllabically, and it followed that her silence did not strike him. He sprang out, when the carriage stopped, to give her his hand, but before he had given his instructions to the coachman, and followed her into the house, she had disappeared into the ladies' cloak-room. Consequently it was not until she came to him as he waited to follow her into the drawing-room that he really saw her. As his eyes rested on the figure coming towards him, he suddenly saw, not it, but a sweet, white face with wistful eyes looking at him from out of a dingy frame.

CHAPTER VII

ALWAYS excellently dressed, Mrs. Romaine's appearance at that moment was brilliant; almost excessively brilliant it seemed for a small dinner-party. Her frock was of the most pronounced type of full-dress, and she wore diamonds; not many, but so disposed, as was her reddish-brown hair, as to make the greatest possible effect. But the detail which had caught her son's experienced eye, and which had brought before him by some unaccountable law of contrast that other woman's face, lay in the fact that to-night for the first time his mother was slightly "made up." The colour on her cheeks, the bright effectiveness of her eyes, was the result of art. It made her look haggard, Julian decided with careless, indifferent distaste; and then he was following her into the room.

She had hardly paused to speak to him ; apparently she imagined that they were late.

They were widely separated at dinner, and were not thrown together, as it happened, during the whole evening. But Mrs. Romaine's personality was a factor in the party not to be ignored that night ; she was delightful, everybody said. It was a very select little dinner, and society romps went on afterwards ; romps to which Mrs. Romaine contributed her full share. And to Julian that newly acquired sense of his mother's artificiality was accentuated as the evening passed on into something like repugnance ; a repugnance which, when he was seated with her at last in the brougham and driving home, produced in him a strong disinclination to rouse himself to an assumption of vivacity, and made him occupy himself with his own thoughts so exclusively that he never noticed that his mother uttered not a single word.

“ Good night, mother ! ” he said absently, as they stood together in the hall. He was stooping to kiss her when she stopped him with a slight, peremptory gesture.

“ I want to speak to you ! ” she said. Her

voice was tense and a little hoarse. Without another word, without so much as glancing at him, she passed him and led the way to his smoking-room; turned up the lamp with a quick, hard gesture, and then turned and faced him.

All the colour had faded from Julian's face, and he had followed her slowly. With the first sound of her voice the conviction had come to him that he was discovered. There were certain weaknesses in him hitherto undeveloped by the circumstances of his life, but radical factors in his character. Morally speaking he was a coward. His hour had come, and he was afraid to meet it. He came just inside the door and stood leaning against the writing-table, confronting his mother, but neither looking at her nor speaking.

"Tell me where you have been since Friday!" she said, low and peremptorily; and then she stopped herself abruptly, putting out her hand as though to prevent him from speaking, as a spasm of pain distorted her face. "No!" she said in a hoarse, breathless way. "No, don't! You'll tell me a lie. Don't! I know!"

She had put out her hand and was steadying herself by the high oak mantelpiece—part of her recent present to Julian—but her face was rigid and set, and her eyes, full of a strange, indefinable agony, which she seemed to be all the while holding desperately at bay, never left the pale, downcast, almost sullen face opposite her.

With a determined wrench and setting in motion of all his faculties, Julian pulled himself together so far as to take refuge in that sure resort of the deficient in moral courage—an assumption of jaunty and light-hearted non-comprehension. Perhaps he had never in his life been more like his mother than he was at that moment as he threw back his head and answered, with an affected gaiety which was somewhat hollow and unsuccessful :

“What do you know, dear? You’re coming it rather strong, aren’t you?”

“I know that you have been living with a common work-girl somewhere in Camden Town for a month or more!”

The words were spoken in the same hoarse voice which rang now, low as it was, with an intolerable disgust. But its expression

seemed to affect Julian not at all. The words themselves were occupying all his perception. A quick frown of consideration appeared on his forehead, as though some relief or reprieve had come to him, bringing with it possibilities the skilful turning to account of which called into play his mental faculties, and in so doing strung up his nerve. He dropped his artificiality of manner, and seemed to brace himself to meet the emergency in which he found himself. The situation had evidently suddenly altered its character for him. He was no longer cowed by it.

There was a pause—a pause in which Mrs. Romaine's eyes seemed to dilate and contract, and dilate again under the suffering to which she allowed expression in neither tone nor gesture; and then there came from Julian four awkward, hardly audible words, jerked out rather than spoken, with long pauses intervening :

“How do you know?”

A short, sharp breath came from Mrs. Romaine, and then she said, with cold decisiveness, though it seemed that nothing would take that hoarseness from her voice :

“It matters very little how I know. That

I know by one chance; that some one else may know by another; some one else again by another—the details in each case, when the chances are innumerable, are nothing! Have you lived all this time in London not to know that discovery is inevitable—to wonder ‘how’ when it comes?”

There was a bitterness, a keenness of scorn in her voice which stung him like a lash, and he answered hotly :

“After all, mother, we are not living in Arcadia! We don’t talk about these things, and I’m awfully sorry, I’m sure, that this should have come to your knowledge; I’m awfully sorry to offend you. But, hang it all, I’m not worse than lots of fellows about!”

His tone had gathered confidence and defiance as he went on, and it seemed to shake her a little. Her hold on the mantel-piece tightened, and she spoke quickly and rather nervously.

“It’s very likely,” she said. “I don’t want to argue the principle with you. Young men have their own ideas, I know; but how many young men—drop out? How many young men, with good positions, good chances,

somehow or other get into bad odour ; get to be not received—or, if they are received, it is with certain reservations—through this kind of thing ? Oh, of course I don't say it's inevitable. There are lots of men about, as you say ! But it's an awful risk. In the case of a young man like you, with no title to the position you hold in society but your—your personality, don't you see, it is a double and treble risk. It is playing with edged tools ; it is holding a knife to your own throat. You would go under so horribly easily."

She paused abruptly, as though the image before her eyes were too terrible to her to be pursued further, and tried to moisten her dry lips, on which the touch of paint had cracked now, showing how white they were beneath. The ghastliness of the incongruity between her manner and the superficialities of which she spoke was indescribable. Julian did not speak ; he was moving one foot to and fro slowly over the carpet, at which he gazed immovably, and his mother went on almost immediately :

"You must give it up, Julian," she said incisively. "I will do anything that is

necessary in the way of money ; I don't want to be hard upon you. Anything the girl wants you shall have ; but you must break with her at once."

She paused again, but still Julian did not speak ; still he did not raise his eyes. She went on with a growing insistence in her voice which went hand in hand with a growing agony of appeal :

"If you don't see the necessity now, you must believe me when I tell you that you will—you will. Look, dear ! your life is surely not so dull that you need run after such distraction as that ! You shall marry if you want to. You shall marry any one you like. But you must—you must give this up. Julian——" She stopped for a moment, and her voice grew thin, almost faint, as she pressed so heavily on the carving by which she held that her hand was bruised and blackened. "Julian, I am not telling you what it has been to me to know that you have deceived me. I am not going to try and make you feel—I don't want you to feel it, dear—what it has been to me to go over your home-life of the last few weeks and know that

you have lied to me at every turn—to me, who have only wanted to make you happy. I won't reproach you. Perhaps young men think it a kind of right—a kind of right——” She repeated the sentence, unfinished as it was, as though it contained an idea to which she clung. “It is not for my sake—to spare my feelings, that I tell you you must give it up. It is for your own. Julian, my boy, you must believe me.”

Her words, quivering with entreaty, died away; her eyes, full of supplication, were fixed on his; and Julian spoke—spoke without lifting his eyes from the ground.

“Suppose I married her?” he said in a low, shamefaced voice.

“What!” The monosyllable rang out sharp and vibrating, and Mrs. Romaine, all softness or relaxation struck from her face and figure in one sudden bracing of every muscle, stood staring at him out of eyes alive with horror.

“Suppose—I married—her!”

“Supposing that—I will tell you! You would have to keep her and yourself! You would have no more of my money, and you

would never be acknowledged in my house again!" Her low voice was like fine, cold steel, and she paused. Then quite suddenly, as though the horror kept at bay in her eyes had leapt up and mastered her in an instant, she flung out her hands wildly, crying: "Julian, Julian! You are not married? Tell me, tell me you are not married?"

And Julian, white to the very lips, said low and hurriedly :

"No!"

There was a long silence. With a choked, hysterical cry, Mrs. Romaine dropped into a chair near her, and covered her face with her hands. Julian drew out his pocket-handkerchief and mechanically wiped his forehead. At last he began, in a nervous, uneven voice :

"Mother, look here, I—you don't quite understand me! I—she—it's—it's not the kind of girl you think!" He stopped and drew his hand desperately before his eyes. That innocent, white face, in its dingy frame, what did it want before his eyes now? How could he get on if he kept looking at it? "She—we—it was my fault! Mother, look here, I ought!"

Mrs. Romaine took her hands away from her face and clenched them together.

"You shall not," she said in a low, steady voice.

"She—she—was an awfully good girl, don't you know. She's not—of course she's not one of our sort, but—she would learn. Mother, after all, why not? Nothing else can—can make it right!"

"Nothing else can ruin you completely!" was the steady answer. "You shall never do it if I can prevent it. I have told you what I would do; think it well over. Think what it would mean to you to have not one farthing but what you can earn! To be cut by every one who knows you! To be without a chance of any kind! I told you that if you married I would disown you! Now I tell you something else! Break off this miserable connection and you shall have, as I said, anything in reason to give the girl in compensation once and for all. Refuse to do so and I will cut off your allowance until you come to your senses!"

"Mother!" he cried fiercely. "By Heaven, mother!"

“You can take your choice!” was the unmoved answer.

Her face was sharp and haggard; the artificial colour stood out on it in great patches, throwing into relief the vivid pallor beneath. She had thrown aside her cloak as though the physical oppression was unbearable to her, and the contrast between her face and her gorgeous dress with its glittering ornaments was horrible.

A smothered oath broke from the young man, and lifting his right hand, he began to rub it slowly up and down the back of his head as an expression of heavy, fierce cogitation settled down upon his face. To his unutterable surprise, as he made the gesture, there stole over his mother's face an expression of such deadly terror as he had never before seen. He stopped involuntarily, and she staggered to her feet, holding out two quivering, imploring hands. For the first time in his life Julian was using a gesture habitual in his dead father; for the first time in his life, looking into her son's face, Mrs. Romaine saw there the face of William Romaine.

“My boy!” she gasped. “My boy. Don’t do that! Don’t look like that, for Heaven’s sake! For Heaven’s sake!”

She swayed for a moment to and fro, and then fell heavily forward into his arms.

CHAPTER VIII

A BITTER east wind, which was taking sufficiently depressing effect upon all London, was dealing with peculiar grimness with Redburn Street, Camden Town. The neat little houses in that dreary grey dryness looked sordidly wretched; there was something deserted and hopeless about them. No one was to be seen, except that at a first-floor window about half-way down a woman's figure was standing; and as Dennis Falconer turned into the street his footsteps rang with heavy distinctness on the glaring pavement. He strode slowly and steadily along, and his solitary figure, as it stood out with that peculiar sharpness of outline which is a characteristic production of east wind, harmonised absolutely with the sombreness of the background. His face was full of sombre purpose, grave and stern.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon of Wednesday—two days after Julian's return home. On the morning of the preceding day Julian and his mother had had a second interview, which had ended in his giving a sullen and reluctant assent to her demands ; and in the evening Dennis Falconer had received from Mrs. Romaine a brief, almost peremptory note, begging him to come to her. He had gone to Queen Anne Street accordingly, severely unsympathetic, but also severely reliable, early on Wednesday morning.

He had found Mrs. Romaine in a feverish agony of agitation beyond even the power of her will to conceal or wholly to control. Her voice, painfully thin and sharp ; her gestures restless, nervous, irritable ; her utterance hard and rapid ; had all testified to a strained, tense excitement before which all her artificiality was utterly submerged, and in which Falconer himself was obviously regarded by her solely as the one instrument at hand to her necessity. Her whole soul seemed to be set upon the immediate termination of "the affair," as she called it. It affected her

evidently in only one way, she looked at it from only one point of view : as something to be finished up, put away, buried out of sight. It was the thought of delay in the doing of this, only, that appeared to torture her ; of the affair itself with all its terrible significance, its inevitable consequences, she had, as far as Falconer could divine, no adequate conception. The girl must be bought off ; must be sent away ; must be sent right out of the country, in case — and here came the one agonised sense of a possible consequence which Falconer could detect—in case Julian should marry her after all !

It was evidently the haunting terror of such a contingency which had driven her to send for Falconer. It was obvious, though she seemed to be striving hard to conceal it even from herself, that she could not trust her son ; that she could find no rest in the promise she had wrung from him. What she had to say to Falconer was, in effect, that some one else must see the girl ; the arrangement to be surely effected must be brought about by a third person who would set about the business promptly and act decidedly. It

was this service which she wanted of Falconer, and Falconer, after a moment's grave self-communing, agreed to render it. He was as far removed from sympathy with her in this her hard, agonised reality as he had been from the artificial woman of the previous months, or from the real woman of eighteen years before. He considered her point of view in the present instance absolutely revolting in her. But no man could question the practical sense of what she said, or the advisability of the course she proposed, and his conception of his obligations as her sole male relative and trustee was too intimately intertwined with his sense of duty and self-respect to allow him to entertain, even for a moment, the possibility of refusing to act for her. He had stood by her side, impelled by that sense of duty, gravely reliable, and unsympathetic, eighteen years before. The irony of fate decreed that it was for him, and for him only, to act for her now. To him it was simply the stern dictate of moral necessity to be obeyed as such.

Accordingly he had received her instructions, offering now and again a grim, practical

suggestion, with a stern air of businesslike reserve ; had undertaken—being at the bottom of her opinion as to the desirability of instant measures—to see “the girl” that same afternoon ; and he was walking down Redburn Street now, in the pitiless east wind, to carry that undertaking into effect.

He reached the house, knocked, and asked briefly for Mrs. Roden. The landlady, whose sentiments towards her lodgers had developed rapidly in consequence of the enquiries which Falconer had felt it his duty to make, received his words with a sniff expressive of contempt ; and then informed him, with a stare of insolent curiosity, that “she” was “hupstairs,” and led the way thither ; evidently urged to that act of civility solely by a hope of finding out something. She was a coarse, vulgar-looking woman, with small red eyes, which glittered expectantly as she flung the door open and announced, in a loud and denunciatory voice, “’Ere’s a gentleman !”

But if she had hoped for startling revelations she was disappointed. Dennis Falconer advanced into the room with stern composure ; the figure in the window turned quickly but

quietly to meet him ; and Mrs. Jackson was obliged to shut the door upon the two.

Clemence was looking very pale. The vague shadow which had fallen upon her as she journeyed up to London two days before had deepened into a wistful, questioning sadness. She had not seen Julian since she parted from him at Victoria Station. On the previous day she had received a note from him which told her that "work" kept him from her for that day, but that he would come as soon as he was able. There was nothing to distress or alarm her in the fact itself ; more than once before a similar disappointment had come to her ; and even though the second day brought her no letter, the blank merely meant, as she assured herself hour by hour, that she would see him before the day was done. But strive against it as she might, and did, she had spent the past twenty-four hours weighed down by a sense of trouble utterly undefined ; utterly, as it seemed to her, without reason. She had borne her burden with mute patience, reproaching herself as for ingratitude and an inordinate desire for active happiness, and struggling bravely to

conquer it; but neither arguing about it nor denying it, as a less simple and straightforward nature would have done. And now the appearance of Falconer seemed suddenly to focus and define her vague distress. The sudden conviction that Julian was ill, and that this gentleman had come from him to tell her so, held her still and silent in a pang of cruel realisation and anticipation.

The light, as she moved, had fallen full upon her face, and as he saw it a certain shock passed through Dennis Falconer. He had seen her figure, and even her face in the distance more than once, but he had never before seen it with any distinctness, and for the first instant the simplicity and purity of its beauty, with the expression deepened by the strange shadow through which the past two days had led her, clashed almost painfully with that idea of "the girl" which had grown, during his conversation with Mrs. Romaine, into a kind of fact for him. The next moment, however, he had reconciled appearances and realities, as he conceived them, with the grim reflection that there is no vice so vicious as that which wears an innocent face; and in

doing so had quenched what might have been perception beneath a weight of narrow truism.

No greeting of any kind passed between them. All Clemence's faculties were absorbed in her dread. Falconer was busied with the process of reconciliation. The strange little silence was broken eventually by Falconer, and he spoke with the unbending sternness and distance which that process and its conclusion had naturally accentuated.

"I am here as the representative of Julian Roden's nearest relative and guardian," he said. It had been arranged between himself and Mrs. Romaine, on the suggestion of the latter, that "the girl," if she did not already know it, should be kept in ignorance of Julian's real name.

The statement was slightly over-coloured, since Julian was of age, and his mother was no longer his guardian in any legal sense; but to stern moralists of Falconer's type, to whom the pretty little falsenesses of life are wholly to be condemned, a slight misstatement in such a case is frequently permissible. The brief, uncompromising words had seemed to

him to set the key of the interview beyond mistake. He was consequently slightly taken aback by their effect.

Every trace of colour died out of Clemence's face, and two great dilated eyes gazed at him for an instant in dumb agony before she whispered :

“He's not—dead?”

Falconer made a slight, almost contemptuous, negative gesture. He had no intention of being imposed upon by theatrical arts, and as Clemence, her self-control shattered by the sudden relief, turned instinctively away, and pressed her face down on the arm with which she had caught at the curtain for support, he went on with immoveable sternness :

“My business has to do with his life, not his death. The main point is very simple, and I will put it to you at once. Absolute ruin lies before him. Is he or is he not to embrace it?”

He saw her start, and she lifted her face quickly, and turned it to him all quivering and unstrung from her recent suffering, and quite white.

“He is in trouble!” she cried, low and breathlessly. “Oh, what is it? What has happened?”

Dennis Falconer’s patience was approaching its limits, and he spoke curtly and conclusively.

“I think we may dispense with this kind of thing,” he said. “It can serve no purpose, as everything is known. I come now from his mother with full power to act for her——”

He was interrupted. A burning colour, the colour of such paralysing surprise as can take in hardly the bare statement, much less the consequent developements and inferences, had rushed suddenly over Clemence’s face, dyeing her very throat.

“His mother!” she exclaimed. “His mother!” Her tone dropped as she repeated the words into a strange, uncertain murmur, in which incredulity, acceptance—as a kind of experiment — and something that was almost fear, were inextricably blended.

The fear alone caught Falconer’s ear. His lips were parted to resume his speech with grim decisiveness in the conviction that she

understood at last that nothing was to be gained by trifling with him, when she said, as though he had had nothing to do with her previous words :

“Go on, please.”

He looked at her again, and was struck by a new look in her face, as he had been struck by a new tone in her voice. She was evidently going to drop all theatricalities, he told himself.

“Perhaps you were not aware that he is, practically, under the control of his mother,” he said. “That is to say, he is dependent on her for every penny he spends. It is quite out of the question that he should make money at the bar — by his own profession, that is to say — for two or three years at least. Consequently the cutting off of the allowance made him by Mrs. — Roden will mean for him absolute penury.”

She was staring at him ; staring at him out of two wide, intense brown eyes ; with such a helpless bewilderment in her face that she seemed to be quite dazed. She put her hand to her head as he paused

with a feeble, uncertain gesture ; but she did not speak, and Falconer went on severely :

“ I conclude that he has not represented these facts to you as they stand. They are facts, nevertheless. You will, therefore, understand that, his allowance withdrawn, he will be entirely without the means of supporting you. You may possibly consider that some shifty means might be found which, by putting him in possession of small sums of money, would enable him for a time to defy his mother. Let me point out to you something of what such a course would involve. Julian Roden is a young man with a good position in society—I mean he is accustomed to be made much of by men and women who are his equals ; he has chances and opportunities of which he intends, no doubt, to avail himself. All this, in taking such a step, he would throw away for ever. Social intercourse, future career, would go with his income at his mother’s word. Now, I will ask you only how long you could hope to depend on him in such circumstances ; how long it would be before his only feeling for the woman whom he had

allowed to drag him down and to destroy all his hopes in life would degenerate into sheer repugnance; and for how long he would care to keep her?"

He paused, and after a moment's dead silence Clemence spoke in a weak, eager, almost desperate voice:

"There must be some mistake! It—it can't be—the same!"

The words seemed to Falconer a mere miserable subterfuge, and he answered very sternly:

"There is not the faintest possibility of mistake. Julian Roden has owned the whole affair to his mother, who taxed him with it on her discovery——"

"Oh, wait a minute! Wait a minute!"

There was a ring of such intolerable pain, such shame and anguish, in the voice, that Falconer's attention, heavy and prejudiced as it was, was arrested by it. Dimly and uncertainly, and for the first time, the girl before him appeared to him, not simply as a representative of a degraded sisterhood, but as a woman. He looked at her for a moment, as she stood with her face buried

in her hands, quivering from head to foot, with a severe kind of pity.

"I will tell you, as briefly as may be, what I am charged to say," he said gravely, but not ungently. "Mrs. — Roden is determined to break off her son's disgraceful connection with you at the cost of any suffering to herself or to him. She is willing to believe that her son is to be considered in some sort as the more guilty party of the two in having acted as the tempter, and she has no wish to deal otherwise than generously by you. But there are conditions."

He paused again. Over the slender, bowed woman's figure before him there had gradually crept, as he spoke, a stillness like the stillness of death; and now, as he waited for her to speak, Clemence slowly lifted her head and looked at him; looked at him with dull, sunken eyes, which seemed the only living points in a face out of which all life and expression seemed to have been crushed by a rigid, haggard mask.

"Conditions?" she repeated.

Her voice was hollow, and had a mono-

tonous, far-away sound, and the word seemed to have no meaning for her.

A sense of vague discomfort took possession of Dennis Falconer. A dim sense that he was not being met as he had expected—as he had a right to expect—disturbed and annoyed him. He had no idea that what he was chiefly discomposed by was a hazy consciousness that a touch of unconscionable respect for the woman who, as he believed, was utterly unworthy of respect, was mingling with his already sufficiently unorthodox sense of pity; but he entrenched himself in a triple armour of stiffness.

“The conditions are these,” he said. “You will give your written word, as under penalties for having obtained money by false pretences, to leave England on a given date and by a given route, and not to return to England within the next ten years. Mrs.—Roden in return will pay you the sum of five hundred pounds. If you refuse these terms, and Roden submits to his mother, you will simply be the poorer by five hundred pounds. If you induce him to defy his mother, the consequences I have

already described to you will inevitably ensue."

He waited for her answer, steadily fortifying himself against being surprised at anything she might say; but no answer came. That strange, stricken face was still turned full towards him, but he had an uneasy sense that he was not seen by the great, dull, dark eyes. He felt, too, that as she stood there with her hands tightly clasped together, she was not thinking even remotely of the choice he had set before her, though he knew that she had heard his words and understood them. It was with an instinctive desire to rouse her, to bring back some expression to her face, that he said, with an awkward gentleness which was quite involuntary:

"There is no need for you to decide hastily. You understand the alternative thoroughly, no doubt. I will leave you my address, and you can write me your answer."

He felt in his pocket for his card-case, and the movement seemed to rouse her. She stopped him with a slight motion of her hand.

"There's no need," she said. As though the act of speaking had brought her back from somewhere far away, and as though the claims of the moment were gradually becoming present to her, she paused as if to gather force, and to close upon herself a certain strangely fine reserve, which seemed at once to hedge her about and hold her aloof from the man to whom she spoke; and then she spoke very quietly. "I don't want any money. If it is better that he should be free of me, he shall be free. That's all."

"You are making a mistake!" returned Falconer quickly. There was something about the dignity of her manner which made him feel curiously impotent and small, as though in the presence of an unknown power greater than himself, and the sense increased the touch of irritation he had already experienced. His tone was no longer coldly stern; it was insistent and annoyed. "You should consider your future. If you accept Mrs. Roden's offer and leave England with a small capital you will have

a chance of beginning life again. The step you have lately taken may be your first step on the downward path—I conclude that it is. You should reflect how difficult it is to pause there. With a little money you may establish yourself in a respectable business, and in the course of time you may even redeem your unfortunate past.”

Not a muscle of the still, pale face moved. It seemed to have grown strangely older and stronger in the course of the short interview, and it listened to him with an air of courteous patience which seemed to set an impassable distance between them. The perfect steadiness of her voice as she replied was the steadiness not of composure but of reserve.

“It is quite impossible!” she said.

“Then I am sorry to have to say that I consider you both foolish and ungrateful!” said Falconer with increasing severity. “You put it entirely out of our power to do anything for you. Am I to understand that you refuse to leave England?”

"I don't know. I must think!" Still the same distant, unmoved patience.

"You will do well to think," was Falconer's reply, "and to put away from you in doing so a false pride, which is entirely misplaced. I will give you twenty-four hours for consideration, and to-morrow afternoon I will call and see you again." On second thoughts it had occurred to Falconer that it would be a false step to give her his name and address. "I shall hope to find that you have come to a sensible decision."

He paused a moment, and she made a slight gesture of acquiescence, rather as though his words were indifferent to her than in any token of assent to what he said. He added a stiff, formal "Good afternoon!" and as her lips moved mechanically as if to frame the words in answer, he turned and left the room.

As though his presence and his words had been so mere a drop in the deep waters of suffering which held her that his withdrawal affected her not at all, Clemence stood for the moment just as he left her, hardly conscious, as it seemed, that he was gone. Then, as

though the sense that she was alone had come to her gradually, she dropped feebly into a chair, and let her face fall heavily forward upon the table.

CHAPTER IX

THE hand crept round the clock, the swift November twilight fell, and still she did not move ; only her clasped hands stretched themselves out as if in prayer. She was not praying though. The attitude was instinctive and unconscious ; a blind, mute appeal. She was simply stunned. The room grew darker and darker until its only light was a ray from the street-lamp outside falling straight across the bowed head ; and then there was a ring at the bell and a slow step upon the stairs. Clemence knew the step well, though she had never before heard it fall like that. As it fell upon her ear now, a strong shiver ran all through her, and her hands were drawn sharply to cover her face. The door was opened, and her face was pressed down still more tightly.

“Clemence! What, all in the dark? Why, Clemence——” The masterful, rather aggressively cheerful young voice stopped abruptly, and Julian Romaine stood still against the door he had closed behind him, listening; listening to a low, pitiful sound, which seemed to fill the very air—the sound of a woman’s heart-broken crying. At the first tone of his voice great, scalding tears had started to Clemence’s eyes suddenly and without warning; a low, choking sob had shaken her from head to foot, and she was crying now with the hopeless abandonment of suddenly loosened grief.

There was a moment during which the only sound in the room was the sound of her quivering sobs. Julian stood quite still; on the first instant there leapt into his face such a look of fierce, vindictive anger as absolutely transformed it. The look faded slowly into a kind of bitter background, and a hard sullenness settled itself upon it—settled with some difficulty as it seemed, for his lips twitched a little. Then he advanced into the room and broke the silence, and the roughness in his tone seemed to defy something within

himself. He made no attempt to light the gas. The lamp outside made it possible to move about, and apparently he did not care for further illumination.

"Come, Clemence," he said, "what's the matter?"

He had not approached her; on the contrary, he was on the other side of the room looking down at her across the lodging-house table. She did not raise her head or move as she replied; indeed, the choked, broken words were rather the expression of the mingled shame and pity with which she was crushed than a definite answer to his words.

"Oh! Julian! Julian! Julian!"

Apparently the tone of her voice affected him in spite of himself, for his face twitched again, and he spoke more harshly still.

"What's the matter, I say?"

She stretched her hands out to him across the table, still without lifting her face, in an unconscious gesture of appeal.

"Oh, don't!" she cried beseechingly and piteously. "Don't, dear! Don't pretend any more. I—I know!"

The hands thrust deep down into Julian's

pockets were clenched fiercely, and his teeth were set together, as a look rose in his eyes which they had never held before.

"My mother?" he said.

She answered only with a slight shivering gesture, but it was enough. With his young face white to the lips with passionate resentment, Julian turned brusquely away and took two blind strides to the window, with a muttered oath.

There was a long silence. Julian stood at the window, staring blankly out into the darkness with hard eyes. Clemence was indeed, as she believed herself to be, his wife. How it had come about, how he had drifted into anything so far from his vague thoughts in his first meetings with her, he could not have said. What it was that had shaped and moulded his intention into something so much purer and more manly than his own nature, he only now and then felt faintly and indefinitely when he touched it, as he could touch it rarely and densely, in the woman from whose higher nature it emanated. He had married her with that reckless carelessness for the future which seems almost abnormal,

but which is not an uncommon characteristic of weakness ; and now he was quite incapable of facing and enduring the legitimate consequences of his action. He had lied to his mother to save himself from the heavier penalty with which she threatened him, and his suggestion as to the possibility of his marrying the girl she believed him to have ruined, had been a miserable, consciously degraded attempt at cutting the Gordian knot. He had lied to his mother again, deliberately and without compunction, at their second interview, giving her a promise which he knew to be an empty form, in his word to break with the girl who was his wife. He had come to Clemence to-day, intending to arrange for that temporary suspension of intercourse with her, which was inevitable as a blind to his mother, by telling her that he was obliged to go abroad immediately for an indefinite period.

Now as he stood there in the dark little room, with his eyes fixed on the solitary gas-lamp outside, he was gradually realising that it was all over. His mother had sent, had possibly come herself, to Clemence, he sup-

posed, and Clemence had, of course, declared herself his wife. His plans were all upset. His carefully made calculations were no longer of any avail. It was all over. His brain gradually ceased to busy itself; he was staring darkly at penury, humiliation, ostracism—not thinking of them or feeling them, but just contemplating them with a stupid, mental gaze.

Gradually a sense of his surroundings began to return to him. He became conscious that it was a street-lamp at which he was looking; that there was a dark little street before him; that there was a dim room behind him; and then from that room a low sound came to him—faint, exhausted, long-drawn sobs, as of a woman who has wept herself into quiet. He began to listen for them and count them involuntarily. Then they began to hurt him; each one seemed to stick something into his heart. At last he walked across almost mechanically, and laid his hand tentatively on her shoulder.

“It’s all right, Clemence!” he said huskily. “It’s all right, dear. After all, you know, you are my wife all right!” He

was conscious of a vague idea that it was the supposition he had allowed that had cut her so cruelly.

There was another moment's pause, and then Clemence slowly lifted her head and looked at him for the first time. Her face was white and exhausted-looking with her tears, and her eyes, luminous and inexpressibly mournful, seemed to look through the pale, good-looking young features above her into the poor cramped soul they hid.

"I?" she said. "What does it matter about me, Julian? It's you! Oh, my dear, my dear, it's you!"

"It—it's awkward!" returned Julian gloomily; his consciousness of the prospect before him seemed to quicken and writhe at what he supposed to be her realisation of it. "It's loss of everything practically, of course. One will be cut right and left, and where money is to come from——"

He was interrupted by a low cry. Clemence had drawn a little back as though to see him better, and was looking up at him with her delicate eyebrows drawn together in intense, painful perplexity and wonder.

“Oh, Julian!” she said, and her low voice had for the first time a ring of reproach in it. “Oh, Julian, it isn’t that, dear! It isn’t that! What does that matter?”

“What does it matter?” echoed Julian with an angry laugh. Her words, in the total want of comprehension, the total incapacity for sympathy with his position, to which they witnessed, seemed to him to throw into sudden, glaring relief the class distinction which lay between them; and the sense of it came upon him, jarring and overwhelming, like an earnest of all he had done for himself. “It matters a good deal, let me tell you, Clemence. It matters—as you can’t understand, you know! It matters just everything!”

“But—compared!” she said in a low, quick tone, a bright, pained light in her eyes. “I know—I know, of course, that there is a great deal I can’t understand. But—compared!”

“Compared with what, in Heaven’s name?” said Julian angrily.

“Compared with—yourself, Julian!” she

cried, laying a tender, clinging touch on his arm. "Compared with your own truth! Oh, don't you know it's that, it's only that that has been so dreadful to me—that made me feel as if my heart was breaking! It's thinking that you've been false, dear! That you've said what's not true, acted what's not true! Oh, it's that that I can't bear for you, my dear, my dear!"

He stood looking down, not at her face, but at the worn, trembling hand holding his in such a clasp of love and shame—shame for him as he vaguely felt; suspended between wrath and a certain cold, creeping feeling which he could not analyse, but which seemed to be gradually turning him into a horrible shadow. It was an involuntary, unwilling concession to this feeling, as one might throw a sop to an on-coming, all-threatening monster, that he muttered awkwardly:

"I—I'm sorry I deceived you, Clemence."

"Deceived me!" There was an emphasis on the pronoun which seemed to lift her far above him in its absolute, unconscious, self-abnegation. "Me! Oh, it isn't that! It doesn't matter who it is or how many people

it is! It's the thing itself. It's the meaning to yourself, and—and Heaven above! Julian, dear, you believe in Heaven above, don't you?" Clemence's creed was very simple; the attitude of the spirit which "Heaven above" had given her was not an affair of many words. "You know it's oneself that matters. It isn't what one has or the friends one has that make the difference—they're not anything really. It's oneself!"

She paused a moment, but he did not speak. He was still looking heavily down at the hand on his arm, and she went on again, her voice trembling with earnestness.

"Julian, there's that at the bottom of everything in all kinds of life! It doesn't matter whether one's rich or poor, it doesn't matter whether people think well of us—we can't always make them, and we can't all be rich. But we can all be good, dear. Heaven means us all to be good, don't you think? Oh, if it didn't, if it wasn't that that mattered most of all down at the bottom, what would the world come to be like? And why should anybody go on living!"

Julian Romaine was very young. Far

down in his nature ; in that awful inextricable tangle which, because it is so awful and so far beyond his reach, man struggles so insanely to reduce to his poor little level, to define, and label, and explain away, but which remains in spite of him a mystery of God ; there was that strange affinity for noble thoughts and things which is the sign manual of His part in man, never wholly withdrawn by its Creator from the earth. It is in the young that that instinctive affinity is most easily reached and touched ; and the simple, ignorant, unworldly words—words which could have touched in Julian no reasoning powers—were the medium which reached it now. Clemence had reached it more than once or twice before, and its feeble stirring in response had quickened it, and rendered it, in some poor and infinitesimal degree, sensitive to her touch.

He drew his arm sharply from those clinging, pleading hands, and turned away, leaning his arm on the mantelpiece so that she could not see his face. That cold, creeping feeling which seemed to sap all his reality had stolen over his whole personality, and he was held

numb and paralysed in the clutch of an all-dominating question. Was it really as she said? His own life, his own world had faded into shadows as of a very dream. Strange, distorted shapes, conceptions so new to him that they wore a weird and ghostly air of unreality, seemed to be rising round him, pressing him into nothingness. Was it as she said? He did not speak, and after a moment Clemence went on; very tenderly, very delicately, as though in her intense sympathy and feeling for the suffering she ascribed to him by intuition, she dreaded to hurt him further; diffidently and with difficulty, because she was so little used to clothing in words all that to her was most real and vital in life.

“You—you must think of the future, dear. I know—I know that you can hardly bear to look at the past, but it—it is past! It hasn’t been you, really! I know it can’t have been! And—it will wear out of your life at last, dear, by—by truth. You will tell your mother that we are married”—a scarlet, agonising colour dyed her face for an instant—“perhaps you have told her

already? And perhaps, perhaps she will forgive you! If not—why if not, perhaps the—the pain will help to wear it out, my dearest.”

Her voice and the expression of the sweet, white face she lifted to him had changed subtly as she spoke. Her great pity and sorrow for him had developed a strange, new phase in her love for him. It had become tenderer, deeper. She had lost her reverence for him, but her love had triumphed over the loss, and through the pain and victory it had won higher ground, and become the love of sympathy and consolation.

But Julian hardly heard her last words. His attention had stopped, as it were, at those preceding them:

“You will tell your mother that we are married!”

Had Clemence not told, then? Was it possible that she had not mentioned it; that his mother did not know even now; that there was still hope?

The thought arrested the current of his thoughts in an instant. The possibilities the thought suggested; all the tangible, definite

advantages it held ; swept over those faintly quickened perceptions in a sudden wave of excitement, numbing them on the instant. The things which had been realities to him as long as he had had any consciousness, took to themselves substance once again and pressed about him. Life and the world resumed their normal complexion, and he lifted his head quickly and turned.

“Do you mean — have you seen my mother ? Whom have you seen ? Do you mean that you have said nothing ?”

There was a pause as Clemence looked at him for a moment confused and startled, it seemed, by his manner. There was a wonderful, unconscious touch of dignity in her gentle manner as she answered :

“I never thought of it !”

“Was it my mother ?”

“No ; a gentleman.”

Julian moved abruptly with a low exclamation, and began to walk rapidly up and down the little room absorbed in eager thought. Clemence watched him with a puzzled, surprised look in her eyes, and a little touch of reserve creeping over her face.

At last he stopped suddenly and began to speak, looking anywhere but on her face.

“Look here, Clemence, I’m afraid this sounds an awfully blackguardly thing to suggest, but you’ll see it’s necessary. It won’t do for me to tell my mother just yet. To tell you the truth she is frightfully set against my marrying. I am done for all round as soon as she knows, and it would be just cutting our own throats to tell her—yet, you know. You see,” he went on hurriedly, evidently anxious to prevent her speaking, “you see, as I am I’ve got very good prospects. In a few years, if all goes well, I shall be making heaps of money at the bar—a fellow that is well known, you know, can always get on—and then it will be all right and simple. Meanwhile, you see, I have plenty of money, and we can be together almost as much as we like, quietly, you know. Whereas if we burst it all up now we shall just starve and be out of it all our lives. Don’t you see?”

He stopped awkwardly, but for the moment he had no answer. Clemence had listened to him, the expression of her face

changing from wonder to incredulity, from incredulity to agony, from agony to the look of a creature stricken to death. She lifted her hand in the silence slowly and heavily to her head. Julian saw the gesture, though he could not see her face, and its heaviness somehow increased his discomfort.

"You see it's only common sense!" he said impatiently.

"You mean that you want to go on living a double life—that you don't want, don't mean to try, to do right!" The voice was not like the voice of the Clemence he knew. It was low, distinct, and stern, and she spoke very slowly.

"I mean that I don't want to ruin myself out of hand!" he said harshly. "Don't be foolish, Clemence!"

"Ruin!" she said in the same tone. "You don't know what real ruin means! I don't know how to make you understand; I'm not clever enough. But I can tell you just this! I would rather die than have it as you say. For your sake, not for my own only, I would rather die. Until your mother knows the truth I won't even see you or speak

to you again. As to taking a penny of your money, I would starve first."

Her tone, vibrating with intensity of meaning, was quite low. She was not declaiming or protesting. She was simply making her stand at a proposition so terrible to her that it had carried her beyond the bounds of emotion. For the moment Julian was startled and aghast.

"You don't mean that!" he said. "Clemence, that's nonsense!"

"It's truth!" she said steadily. "You must choose!"

She was standing facing him, her slight figure erect and straight as he had never seen it. Her face was white as death, and set into strange, fine lines quite new to it; all the softness about her mouth was being gradually pressed out as the latent strength developed, as it seemed, with every breath she drew. It was as though the crisis, in its sudden demand upon her forces, was transforming her as she grappled with it; transforming her into a woman before whom Julian felt himself shrink into utter contemptibility. He took the only means he

knew to reassert himself, and lost his temper deliberately.

“Well, then, I do choose!” he cried violently. “You’re a foolish girl, who doesn’t understand, Clemence, and by-and-by you’ll own I was right! As to not taking my money, that’s absurd, you know! You must! But I’m not going to ruin both of us for absurd fancies!”

He stopped, hoping she would answer and give him some advantage, but she stood silent, gazing at him with stern, searching eyes, as though she were trying in vain to reconcile the man before her with the man she loved. Julian felt her gaze though he could not see it, and he went on hotly, trying, as it were, to gather round him the rags of his old authority and superiority.

“You don’t suppose, Clemence,” he said, “that I propose this because I like it? It’s not a nice thing for a man to propose to his wife, I can tell you. I should have hoped you would have understood that. But after all it’s only for a time, and it won’t make any real difference to you—things will be just as they have been. And if you

can't feel about it as I do, you must remember it's because you've got a great deal to learn still, and you must believe that what I say is right. Anyway, you're my wife, you know, and you're bound to obey me!"

"I'm bound to obey you in all things that it's right you should ask. But I'm not bound to do what would be dragging you down and me too. I can't make you do what's right; it wouldn't do you any good for me to tell your mother; but until you do, it will be as I said."

"Then it's you who part us," he cried passionately. "You don't love me, Clemence! You can't ever have loved me!"

There was a moment's pause, and then her answer came in a strange, still voice.

"I do love you!" she said. "I love you so that I would give my life to blot out what you've said!"

A dead silence—a silence in which Julian Romaine seemed to feel something pulling and straining at his heart-strings. Then with a reckless, desperate effort he tore himself away from its influence and spoke.

"It can't be helped, then," he said

fiercely and defiantly. "You must go your own way until you come to your senses! Some day, perhaps, you'll be grateful to me for refusing to make fools of us! I wouldn't have believed it of you, Clemence! You make me almost sorry that I ever saw you. Now, look here; I've put it to you from every point of view; I've tried as hard as ever I can to make you understand, and if you won't, you won't! As to the money, of course, I can't hear of your not taking that. I shall send you so much regularly every month—it won't be very much either, but it'll be enough to keep you—and, of course, you'll have to spend it. But you need not be afraid that I shall want to see you again until you come to a more sensible frame of mind."

He waited, but again there was no answer, and again some influence from her still presence discomfited him, and made him hurry on.

"I'm going now!" he said roughly. "Good-bye, Clemence!" He made a movement as though to go, without a tenderer farewell, but quite suddenly his heart failed

him. He turned again and took her into his arms impulsively and tenderly. "Clemmie!" he said brokenly. "I say—Clemmie!"

Her arms were round his neck pressing him closely and more closely, with a desperate, agonised pressure, and a long, clinging kiss was on his cheek.

"Don't keep me waiting long," she whispered hoarsely. "You will do it at last. I know, I know you will. But—don't keep me waiting long!"

She released him and drew herself gently out of his arms, and Julian turned and stumbled out of the room and down the stairs, the most consciously contemptible young man in London, and with no strength to act upon his consciousness.

CHAPTER X

“You admire it, Mrs. Romaine? It strikes you as true? Ah, but that is very charming of you!”

A confused babel of voices—that curious, indefinable sound which is shrill, though its shrillness would be most difficult to trace; harsh, though it arises from the voices of well-bred men and women; and absolutely unmeaning—was filling the two rooms from end to end; and the soft light diffused by cleverly arranged lamps fell upon groups of smartly dressed women and men, equally correct in their attire on male lines. It was about five o'clock, not a pleasant time on a gusty, sleety November afternoon if Nature is allowed to have her own way; but inside these rooms it was impossible to do anything but ignore nature; the air was so soft and

warm—faintly scented, too, with flowers—and the colour so rich and delicate. The rooms themselves were a curious hybrid between the fashionable and the artistic; that is to say, they were not arranged according to any conventional tenets, and there were various really beautiful hangings, “bits” of old brass, “bits” of old oak, and “bits” of old china about. But all these, though very cleverly arranged, were distinctly “posed.” The larger of the two rooms was obviously a studio; rather too obviously, perhaps, since the fact was impressed by a certain superabundance of artistic prettinesses. Charming little arrangements in hangings, palms, or what not, “composed” at every turn with the constantly shifting groups. The unconventionalism, in short, was as carefully arranged as was the attitude of the host of the hour as he stood leaning against a large easel, mysteriously curtained, talking to Mrs. Romaine. He was a painter, and a clever painter; he had married a clever wife, and as a result of the working of their respective brains towards the same goal he

had become the fashion. "Everybody" went to "the Stormont-Eades' affairs," whether the affair in question was a little dinner, a little "evening," or a little tea-party—Mrs. Stormont-Eade always affixed the diminutive; consequently everybody was obliged to go; a fact which if carefully thought out, will lead to some rather curious conclusions. And the little tea-parties, particularly in the winter, were considered particularly desirable functions. One of these tea-parties was going on now.

Mr. Stormont-Eade himself was a tall, good-looking man who had nearly succeeded, by dint of careful attention to his good points, in conveying the impression that he was a handsome man. He had fine eyes, really remarkably fine, as he was well aware, when they were earnest, and they were looking now with a deep intensity of meaning, which was their normal expression, into Mrs. Romaine's face; his mouth was not so admirable except when he smiled, and consequently his thin lips were slightly curved; his figure was too thin, and the touch of

picturesqueness about his pose and about his velvet coat redeemed it; but his closely-curling hair was cut short and trim, and showed the excellent shape of his head to the best advantage. He had come up to Mrs. Romaine only a minute or two before at the conclusion of a song; a very little very fashionable music was always a feature of the Stormont-Eades' entertainments, and "good people"—the phrase in this connection representing clever professionals possessed of the social ambition of the day—were glad to sing or play for them; and she had begun to speak of a little picture of his which was one of the themes of the moment.

Mrs. Romaine was dressed from head to foot in carefully harmonised shades of green—green was the colour of the season—with a good deal of soft black fur about it. Her bonnet became her to perfection; her face was so animated that in the soft light a certain haggard sharpness of contour was hardly perceptible. Her smiles and laughs as she exchanged greetings and chat were always ready; if they left her eyes quite

untouched, her attention was apparently as free and disengaged as were the gay little gestures with which she emphasized her talk. There was absolutely nothing about her which could have suggested to the ordinary observer anything beyond the surface of finished society woman which she was presenting so brightly to the world. But on the previous evening she had had a note from Falconer, written immediately after his interview with "the girl," telling her only that he was to have a second interview, and would see her on the following day. That day was now drawing to a close, and she had as yet heard nothing further.

"It enchanted me!" she said now. "But then your things always do enchant me, you know! By-the-bye, people say that you are going to do a big picture. I hope that is not so? Little bits are so much more fascinating."

Mr. Stormont-Eade smiled — the tender, comprehending smile that was one of his charms.

"No, it is not true," he said. "One is

so fettered with a large work, but little things represent the inspiration, the feeling of the moment. If they have any value, it lies in that." They had a distinct financial value, though it is doubtful whether the dealers would have recognised the source.

"Ah, the feeling of the moment!" said Mrs. Romaine with pretty fervour. "That is what one so seldom gets, isn't it? And it is so delightful!"

Then she broke off with a charming smile to shake hands with Mrs. Halse, brought by the constant shifting of the groups into her vicinity. Mrs. Romaine was an excellent listener, and reputed a good talker, though she had probably never said a witty or a clever thing in her life; but she was never exclusive; she was always, so to speak, more or less in touch with the whole room, and ready to extend her circle.

"I've been making for you for hours," she said gaily. "Ah!" The word was an exclamation of pleased surprise as she suddenly became aware of a girl's figure behind Mrs. Halse; a girl's figure much better dressed

than had been its wont, and very erect, with a latent touch of triumph and excitement on the pretty face. It was Miss Hilda Newton.

"I did not know you were in London," went on Mrs. Romaine, holding out her hand with gracious cordiality.

"She is staying with me on most important business," said Mrs. Halse. Mrs. Halse had accommodated herself to her increasing portliness by this time, and had apparently thought it necessary to increase the exuberance of her manner proportionately. Her voice, and the laugh with which she spoke, were equally loud. "Trousseau, you must know. She is to be married directly after Christmas. And when I heard it I wrote and said she'd better come straight to me, and then I could see that she got the right things. Of course, as she's to live in town, she must have the right things, you know."

"Of course," assented Mrs. Romaine gaily and airily. "And you are very busy?"

The last words were addressed to Hilda Newton, whose hand Mrs. Romaine still held.

There was a curious mixture of resentment, defiance, and triumph in the girl's face as she confronted the suave, smiling countenance of the elder woman, which just touched her voice as she answered :

“ Very busy indeed ! ”

She was conscious of a desire so to frame her answer as to suggest the position in society which was to be hers on her marriage, but she could think of no words in which to do it.

“ And where is Master Julian ? ” broke in Mrs. Halse. Delicacy and tact had never been more than names with her ; as her fibre, mental and physical, coarsened, she was beginning to think it quite unnecessary to maintain even a bowing acquaintance with these qualities ; and her strident voice expressed a great deal that Hilda Newton would like to have expressed. “ He must be made to come and offer his congratulations — or perhaps Hilda will compound with him for a particularly handsome wedding - present. He knows Talbot Compton, of course ? Otherwise, they must be introduced.”

“He is not here this afternoon, I’m sorry to say,” returned his mother, smiling. Mr. Stormont-Eade, if he could have recognised “the feeling of the moment” in this particular crisis, might have learnt a lesson on several points. “He has turned into a tremendously hard worker, you know. An astonishing fact, isn’t it? I tell him he has secret intentions of taking the bench by storm.”

She was laughing and looking idly away across the room, when quite suddenly she stopped. Just inside the doorway, shaking hands with Mrs. Stormont-Eade, and having evidently just arrived, was Dennis Falconer, and as she caught sight of him there flashed into her eyes, through all the superficial brightness of her face, something which was like nothing but a sheer agony of hunger. It came in an instant, and it was gone in an instant. As he turned away from his hostess and caught her eye, she made him a light gesture and smile of greeting, and turned again to Mrs. Halse; and Mrs. Halse was not even conscious of a pause.

“It’s almost too astonishing, don’t you know!” said that vociferous lady with a laugh. “I don’t half believe in these sudden transformations. If I were you I should make him produce his work every night for inspection. It’s my belief he is getting into mischief. These hard-working young men are such frauds!”

She laughed loudly, and at that moment accident brought Falconer, on his way across the room, to a standstill a few paces from her. He had evidently intended to pass the little group, but Mrs. Halse frustrated his intention. With a peremptory gesture she claimed his attention, and as he drew nearer, she said boisterously :

“Now, don’t you agree with me, Mr. Falconer? Aren’t these good, hard-working boys the greatest scamps going?”

Falconer was looking very severe and impassive; he shook hands with Mrs. Halse, and then turned perforce to Mrs. Romaine, taking her hand with an almost solemn gravity, which contrasted sharply with the careless gaiety with which she extended it.

"I didn't expect to see you this afternoon," she said lightly. "Stupid of me, though; every one comes to the Stormont-Eades'."

"I did not expect to meet you," he answered sternly. "I have called at Queen Anne Street."

He had been astounded at not finding her at home. He was distinctly of opinion that afternoon teas were not for a woman who should be sitting in sackcloth and ashes, and the sight of her had shocked not only his sense of propriety, but some deeper sense of the reality of the crisis at which he was assisting. Perhaps Mrs. Romaine understood that her presence at the "little tea-party" scandalised him, for there was a strange, bitter smile on her lips before she turned to Mrs. Halse, and said, with a rather hard, strained ring in her gay voice :

"You'll get no support from my cousin, I assure you, Mrs. Halse. He was a most praiseworthy——"

Her voice was drowned in a ringing chord on the piano, and as the prelude to a song filled the room, she made a mocking

gesture expressive of the impossibility of making herself heard; and turning her face towards the singer, as she stood by Falconer's side, she composed herself to listen. Her face grew rather set and fixed in its lines of animated attention as the song went on, and when it ceased, her comments were of the indefinitely delighted order. She made them very easily and brightly, however, and then she turned carelessly to Falconer.

"Are you thinking of staying long?" she said lightly. "I rather want to talk to you, do you know—this unfortunate man is my man of business, you must know, Mrs. Halse—and I thought perhaps that I could drive you somewhere."

"I shall be happy to go whenever you like," was the grave answer.

Mrs. Romaine laughed lightly.

"Oh, I don't want to take you away immediately!" she said. "You've only just come, I'm afraid. In a little while!"

She smiled and nodded to him, and to Mrs. Halse and Miss Newton, and moved away to speak to some other people.

About a quarter of an hour later Falconer,

who was a somewhat grim ornament to society in the interval, saw her coming smiling towards him.

“Ready?” she said. “That’s very nice of you! Suppose we go, then?”

He followed her out of the room and down the stairs, her flow of comments and laughter never ceasing; put her into her carriage, and got in himself.

“Home!” she said sharply to the coachman. The door banged, they rolled away into the darkness and the wet, and her voice stopped suddenly.

They rolled along for a few minutes in total silence. Shut up alone with her like that, the isolation and quiet following so suddenly on the crowd and noise of a moment before, Falconer’s only conscious feeling was one of almost stupid discomfort. Her sudden silence, too, had an indefinable but very unpleasant effect upon him. At last he said with awkward displeasure :

“I was going to write to you! I——”

She lifted her hand quickly and stopped him.

“When we get in!” she said in a quick,

tense voice. "You can come in? It is just six. It need not take long."

"I am quite at your service."

She leant back in her corner with a sharp breath of relief, and neither moved nor spoke again until the carriage drew up at her own door.

She opened the door with a latch-key, and moved quickly across the hall to the foot of the stairs, motioning to Falconer to follow her. Then she stopped abruptly and turned. A servant was just crossing the hall to the dining-room, where the preliminary preparation for a dinner-party could be seen.

"Is Mr. Julian in?" said Mrs. Romaine sharply.

"Not yet, ma'am."

"If he should come in before I go to dress, tell him that I am engaged."

She turned again and went on to the drawing-room.

"Now!" she said in a breathless peremptory monosyllable, facing Falconer as he shut the door. She did not attempt to sit down herself or to invite Falconer to do so. All

her senses seemed to be absorbed in the desperate anxiety with which her face was sharp and haggard. She looked ten years older than she had looked in Mr. Stormont-Eade's studio. Falconer answered her directly with no preliminary formalities.

"I saw the—the young woman yesterday," he began; "but I was unable to bring about any arrangement. I gave her twenty-four hours for consideration, and this afternoon I called to see her again."

"Yes, yes!"

"I found that she had left the house this morning, leaving no address."

"Left!" The erect, tense figure confronting him staggered back a step as though a heavy blow had fallen upon it, and Mrs. Romaine caught desperately at the back of a chair. "Left—and you don't know where she is? You've settled nothing? We've no hold over her!"

The words had come from her in hoarse, gasping sentences, each one growing in intensity until the last vibrated with an agony of very despair, but Falconer's face grew

grimmer as he listened. How it was he could not have told, but a strange, uncomfortable remembrance of the girl he had seen on the previous day, which had haunted him at more or less inopportune moments ever since, seemed to rise now and accentuate all his usual antagonism to the woman who was talking of her.

"I think you need not distress yourself," he said stiffly. "Perhaps I had better tell you at once that your son knows no more of her whereabouts than we do."

The drawn look of despair relaxed on Mrs. Romaine's face; relaxed into an agony of questioning doubt.

"Doesn't know?" she said sharply. "Julian doesn't know?"

"The landlady of the house," continued Falconer, "a very unpleasant and loquacious woman, was eager to inform me that on the arrival of your son yesterday afternoon, about an hour after I saw the young woman, there was a quarrel between them and that he left the house in anger. To-day, very shortly before my arrival, he returned and was astonished to

find that the young woman was gone. He demanded her address, and was furious to find that it was not known. I think there is no room for doubt that the young woman has left him !”

The colour was coming back to Mrs. Romaine's face slowly and in burning patches, and her clutch on the chair was almost convulsive.

“Left him !” she said under her breath. “Left him !” There was a moment's pause, and then she said in a harsh, high-pitched, concentrated tone : “Do you mean—for good ? Why ? Why should she ?”

“I am sorry to have to say it to you,” said Falconer slowly, “but I fear the case against your son is even blacker than it appears on the surface. I think it more than possible that he deceived the young woman.”

The slowly-formed conviction—and it became conviction only as he spoke the words—was the result of that vague and disturbing impression made on Falconer on the preceding day by “the young woman.” It had worked slowly and almost without consciousness on

his part, but it had refused to die out, and it had attained the only fruition possible to it in his last words.

“And you believe that she is really gone? That there is nothing more to fear from her?”

It was the same absorbed, intent tone, and her eyes, fixed eagerly on Falconer now, were hard and glittering. The terrible significance of his words, with all the weight of tragedy they held, seemed to have passed her by, to have no existence for her. It was as though the sense in her which should have responded to it was numbed or non-existent. And Falconer, scandalised and revolted, replied sternly :

“I think you need have no anxiety on that score. She has disappeared of her own free will, and your son, upon reflection, will probably be glad to accept so easy a solution of what he doubtless recognises by this time as a troublesome complication.” There was a rigid and utterly antipathetic condemnation of Julian in his voice; he had judged the young man, and sentenced him as vicious to the core,

and for all his experience, he held too rigidly to his narrow conception to consider the possible effect upon youth and passion of so sudden and total a thwarting. "My only fear," he continued, "is that serious injustice has been done. The young woman is by no means the kind of young woman I was led to believe her. I have grave doubts as to whether it was not our duty to enforce a marriage upon your son, instead of negating the suggestion."

The words were probably rather more than he would have been prepared to stand to had they been put to a practical issue, and he had spoken them, though he hardly knew it, more from a severe desire to arouse what he called in his own mind "some decent feeling" in the woman to whom he spoke, than from any other reason. From that point of view they failed completely. It was a bright light of triumph that flashed into Mrs. Romaine's eyes as she said quickly, and in an eager, vibrating tone, which seemed less an answer to him personally than to the bare fact to which he had given words :

“Fortunately there is no more fear of that.”

The tall clock standing in a corner of the room chimed the three-quarters as she spoke, and she started as she heard it.

“It is a quarter to seven,” she said. “And I have people to dinner. You have nothing else to tell me, have you? Nothing to advise?”

“Nothing,” was the grim answer.

“You do not think—would it be a good thing, do you think, to have the girl traced so that we could always be sure?”

“You need take no further trouble in the matter, in my opinion. If you should observe anything in your son’s conduct to revive your uneasiness, the question must, of course, be reconsidered. You will observe him closely, no doubt.”

There was a moment’s curiously dead silence, and then it was broken by a strange half-laugh.

“No doubt!” said Mrs. Romaine. “No doubt!”

Another pause, and then she turned and glanced at the clock.

"I must go," she said. "Thank you."

She held out her hand, and he just touched it as though conventionality alone compelled him.

"I have considered myself bound in duty in the matter," he said stiffly. "Good night!"

No touch of artificiality returned to her manner even in dismissing him. It remained hard and practical. Her intense absorption in the subject of their interview did not yield by so much as a hair's breadth, and she remained absolutely impervious to any thought of the man before her. His slight, cold touch of her hand, the sternness of his obvious condemnation of her, were evidently absolutely unobserved by her.

"Good night!" she returned; and as he left her without another word, she crossed the room rapidly and went upstairs to dress for dinner.

The dinner-party of that evening was unanimously declared by the guests to be quite the most delightful Mrs. Romaine had ever given. The dinner, the flowers, all the arrangements, were perfection, of course; but

even when this is the case the "go" of a dinner-party may be a variable or even a non-existent quality ; and it was the "go" of this particular occasion that was so remarkable. All the component parts of the party seemed to be animated and fused into one harmonious whole by the spirits of the hostess and host. Mrs. Romaine was so charming, so bright, so full of vivacity ; Julian, who put in his appearance only just before the announcement of dinner, was so boyish, so lively, so ingenuous. He was a little pale when he first appeared, and the lady he took down to dinner reproached him with working too hard ; but as the evening wore on he gained colour. The relations between himself and his mother had always been quite one of the features of Mrs. Romaine's entertainments, but those relations had never been more charmingly accentuated than they were to-night.

Until he came gaily in among her guests that evening, Julian and his mother had not met since that second interview which had prompted her summons to Falconer. Julian had dined out on both the intervening evenings, and it was easily to be arranged under

these circumstances, if either of the pair so willed it, that forty-eight hours should go by without their coming in contact with one another. And an onlooker aware of the circumstances of their last meeting, and watching the mother and son through the evening now, might have reflected that the laws of heredity seldom operate exclusively through one parent.

“Good night, dear Mrs. Romaine! Such a delightful evening! How I do envy you that dear boy of yours! It’s the greatest pleasure to see you two together.”

The speaker was a good-natured old lady, and she had thought it no harm to put into words what her fellow-guests had only thought. She was the last departure, and Mrs. Romaine followed her to the top of the stairs, with a laughing deprecation of the words which was very fascinating, and then turned back into the drawing-room with another “good night,” as Julian prepared to attend the old lady to her carriage.

The hall door shut with a bang, and then there was a moment’s pause. The mother in

the drawing-room above, and the son in the hall below, stood for an instant motionless. A subtle change had come over Mrs. Romaine's face the instant she found herself alone. It had sharpened slightly, and an eager, haggard anticipation was striving to express itself in her eyes, only to be resolutely veiled. But to Julian's face as he stood with his hand still resting on the hall door there came a great and sudden alteration. All the light and gaiety died out of it before a wild, fierce expression of rebellion and distaste, repressed almost instantly by a pale, sullen look of determination. He moved, and Mrs. Romaine, hearing his step, moved slightly also; he came up the stairs, and as he came he seemed to force back into his face the easy smile it had worn all the evening.

"It's been a great success, hasn't it, dear?" he said lightly as he crossed the drawing-room threshold.

"A great success!" she said in the same tone—though in her case it rang a little thin.

An instant's silence followed, and then she

laid her hand airily on his arm. Her lips were white and dry with agitation, and she knew it; she wondered desperately whether her voice rang as unnaturally in Julian's ears as it did in her own, as she said with what she meant for perfect ease:

"Dear boy, let us say our final words upon that wretched business to-night and wake up clear of it to-morrow. May I be happy about you? That's all there is to be said, isn't it?"

She tried to smile, but she knew the effort was a ghastly failure, and again she wondered whether Julian saw. She need not have feared! Julian was busy with his own histrionic difficulties, and had neither sight nor hearing for her.

"You may be quite happy, little mother!" he said, and the frank tenderness of his tone and manner were only very slightly over-accentuated. "I've made up my mind to do as you wish, and I won't make such a fool of myself again!"

They were standing close together, looking each into the other's face, and he patted her hand as it lay on his arm as he finished.

Yet between them, parting them as seas of ice could not have parted them, there lay a shadow beneath which love itself survives only as the cruellest form of torture; the shadow of the unspoken with its chill, unmoveable dead weight against which no man or woman can prevail.

The hand on Julian's arm trembled a little. The terrible presence, which is never recognised except by those to whom its chill is as the chill of death, was making itself vaguely felt about his mother's heart. She let her eyes stray from his face with a painful, tremulous movement, and her fingers tightened round his arm.

"It is all over?" she murmured in a low voice. "It is all over, really?"

As her self-command failed her his seemed to strengthen. He patted her hand again reassuringly, and said, confidently:

"Yes, dear, indeed! I've only got to beg your pardon, and I do that with all my heart."

He stooped and kissed her tenderly, and as he did so she seemed to rally her forces with a tremendous effort. She returned his

kiss with a pretty, effusive embrace, though her lips were as cold as ice.

"I grant it freely," she said. "And if I've felt obliged to be—well, shall we say rather autocratic?—for once in a way, you must forgive me, too, eh?"

But the unspoken, terrible reality as it is, was to be touched by no such ghastly travesty. Julian's laugh was only a firmer echo of his mother's gay artificiality of tone, but as she heard it her lips turned whiter still.

"That's of course," he said. "Of course."

"Then it's all settled!" she responded gaily. "We'll draw a veil over the past from to-night, and behave better in the future. Good night, dear boy!" She kissed him again, patted him lightly on the shoulder and moved away. On the threshold she stopped, turned, and blew him a kiss over her shoulder. "Forgiveness and oblivion from to-night," she said; and there was a strange, defiant gaiety in her voice.

With another smile and a nod she went upstairs, and as she went her face grew

lined and drawn, like the face of an old woman, and the defiance that had lurked in her voice stared out of her eyes, half-wild and reckless.

CHAPTER XI

It was a bright spring day ; one of those days on which the freshness and renewal of life which only spring knows, and for the sake of which even the cold monotony of winter is endurable, seem to be in the very air, and to radiate with the light itself. Even in London, where nature's broadest effects, only, can be felt, there was a sense of exuberance which was almost excitement. The sun shone with a brightness which seemed to shed oblivion over past darkness. The air was quickening and stirring with vague and limitless possibilities.

It is rather a notable arrangement which makes the quickening of life in one of the least natural systems in the world, London society, simultaneous with nature's great awakening. It presents a suggestion of

combined travesty, patronage, and unconscious testimony to that affinity between man and nature which nothing can wholly destroy, which, if worked out with a certain amount of latitude to a fantastic imagination, will have a rather bewildering effect upon the focus of things in general. But it is nevertheless a fact that on this particular day in May very many of the impulses stirring in nature had their strangely distorted counterparts in the impulses of society. Society, like nature, had discarded its winter garments, its winter habits; society, like nature, was restless with fresh beginnings, fresh hopes, fresh tendencies. The resemblance lay on the surface; the contrast was farther to seek.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon, and a certain section of society—a gathering, at least, very fairly representative of a certain section—was surging in a good-tempered, aimless, demoralised way in a very fashionable church in Kensington. Some of the demoralisation was due to the occasion—a smart wedding—but the gaiety and the general air of readiness to be pleased which

prevailed were as certainly the outcome of the wider spirit of the hour as were the smart spring gowns and the quantities of spring flowers carried or worn by the women. The bridal party had left the church and a general exodus was in progress; progress rendered rather slow by reason of the difficulties attendant on the bringing together of carriages and owners, and involving a considerable crush inside the church door. In the middle of this crush, allowing himself to be pushed and drifted along towards the door, was a man who was apparently too fully occupied in casting keen, comprehensive and reconnoitring looks about him, and in returning the gestures of greeting and welcome which returned his glances on all sides, to take much heed as to the manner or direction of the movement imposed upon him by the moving crowd. It was Marston Loring, and as he finally emerged into the air he was lightly clapped on the shoulder by Lord Garstin, who, a few yards in front of him during their compressed passage out of the building, had waited for him on the pavement.

“Glad to see you back, Loring!” he said.

“ Heard last night of your arrival. How are you ? ”

“ Not sorry to be back,” returned Loring nonchalantly, as he shook hands. “ I’ve come to the conclusion, though, in the course of the last half-hour, that six months is a mere nothing ! ”

“ Are you walking round to the house ? ” asked Lord Garstin. “ So am I. Let me have your news as we go.”

Marston Loring had spent the winter at the Cape. His departure had been alluded to among his smart acquaintances as “ a sudden affair ” more or less indefinitely connected in their minds with that “ business ” of which Loring was understood to be a devotee. To Loring himself it had been by no means a sudden thing. That is to say, the necessity for it had been gradually growing up about him in his professional life much against his will, though it had reached a crisis somewhat unexpectedly. He had been absent six months, and this was, practically, his social reappearance ; but looking at him as he turned into the street with Lord Garstin, it would have been difficult to believe that he had

been away at all; far less that he had passed through any striking experiences of men and life. His keen, cynical, unpleasant face was entirely unaltered; his manner was perfectly calm and unmoved. If he had his observations to make on his return, if the result of those observations was rather exciting than indifferent to him, interest and emotion were still entirely outside his pose.

The talk between the two men, however, as they passed along the streets was such talk as passes when one of the two is occupied in picking up dropped threads, and the other is well calculated, and well satisfied, to help him in the process. In his heart of hearts—if such a spot could have been reached in him—Lord Garstin would probably have confessed to little personal liking for Loring; his cordiality was the result of considerably involved workings of social politics. Just at this moment in particular, with the prestige fresh upon him of sundry smart magazine articles on Cape affairs which he had sent home from time to time, and which had been a good deal talked about,

Marston Loring was distinctly a man to be noticed and encouraged.

Details connected with the wedding at which they had just assisted were naturally the first topics that presented themselves. It was Hilda Newton's wedding; she had been married with much circumstance from Mrs. Halse's house; and, before Loring left England, it had been said that she was to be married at Christmas at her own home in Yorkshire. About a month before the day fixed for the wedding, however, the aunt with whom she lived had died; the wedding had perforce been postponed, and when it became possible to consider another date, Mrs. Halse—in the absence of any near relation to the bride-elect—had taken the matter in hand.

“A very nice affair she's made of it!” commented the elder man, as he finished his explanation, interspersed with discursive items of news of all sorts appertaining to society and its doings. “A little loud, of course; that goes without saying; and, really, nowadays it's rather the thing! A pretty girl in her way, Mrs. Compton. And talking

of pretty girls, Maud Pomeroy looked well. They've been at Cannes since the end of January ; only just back, like yourself."

"So I heard," answered Loring indifferently. "By-the-bye, I didn't see the Romaynes. Aren't they in town? I've not had time to look any one up yet, of course, but I thought I should see Julian to-day."

Lord Garstin paused a moment before he answered.

"They were there," he said. "I saw them come in. You'll see them at the house, no doubt. The little woman's been invisible for two or three days ; ill—rather bad, somebody said."

"Ill!" echoed Loring ; and there was a genuine surprise in his tone which no information yet bestowed upon him had evoked. "Really!" He paused a moment, and then said, with his own peculiar smile : "And how is Julian? Does the hard-working line hold out?"

Lord Garstin smiled, more pleasantly than Loring had done, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Pretty well, I suppose," he said. "I

met his chief the other night, and he was not enthusiastic. He's a nice boy, though. You're a great chum of his, aren't you, Loring?" Loring nodded. "Then let me give you a hint to have an eye to his proceedings at the club. Cards are all very well, you know, but a boy like that should be moderate. You might be able to talk to him about it. I gave his mother a hint a few weeks ago. She's a nice little woman. See what you can do, will you? I've got an idea that the foolish fellow doesn't play only at the club."

They were close to Mrs. Halse's house as Lord Garstin finished, and his last words were spoken quickly and significantly. Loring answered only by a slight movement of his eyebrows, and then they were in the hall, being swept on by a seething crowd to pay their respects to the hostess and the bride.

"Loring, old man! How are you?"

Loring and Lord Garstin had been thrown together again after offering their congratulations, and they were standing side by side. Julian Romaine was close beside them, having come up from behind through the crowd un-

perceived, his hand eagerly, even demonstratively, outstretched.

Thinking things over in private later on, Marston Loring thought with a cynical smile that if he had not previously realised his six months' absence, he might have done so when young Romaine's voice fell on his ear. The change in it, though subtle, was so marked—to the man who had not heard it in course of transition—that it seemed to place years rather than months between their last meeting and the present, and it amply prepared Loring for what he saw when he turned round.

All alteration in manner and appearance consists rather in the accentuation or modification of original characteristics than in the developement of fresh ones; consequently it is very seldom noticed by a casual observer when intercourse is unbroken. To Lord Garstin and to dozens of his other acquaintances, Julian Romaine was still a "nice boy," just as his good-looking features were still the young features of a year ago. To Loring the difference in face was as perceptible as was the difference in the young man's whole

personality, and the key-note of the difference lay in the absence of genuineness in both; in the deliberate assumption in the present of what had been natural and uncalculated in the past. Julian's face had grown thinner and harder, and the boyish smile which was in consequence no longer perfectly harmonious was a trifle over-accentuated; while the bright, ingenuous glance of his eyes had grown extraordinarily like his mother. His manner was the gay, young manner which had gained him so many friends, with just that touch of exaggeration added to it which artificiality gives.

His cordiality as he wrung Loring's hand was rather—like the demonstrative welcome in his voice—admirably adjusted to meet the requirements of the moment than an expression of the man himself. He was very carefully dressed, with a particularly dainty flower in his buttonhole.

“Back again at last, old fellow!” he said buoyantly. “By Jove, what an age it is since you went! And have you had a good time? When did you reach home? Tell us all about it! You've no idea how glad I am

to have him back, Lord Garstin!" he added, greeting the elder man with a boyish, half-laughing apology for his exuberance which was very effective. His manner to Lord Garstin was as charming as ever; rather more so, indeed, as its frank deference had acquired a polish derived from sundry little artistic touches such as only calculation and intention can bestow.

"You seem to have managed very well without me!" returned Loring, with good-humoured satire. "The world seems to have used you pretty fairly, I'm glad to see! I've only been back about forty-eight hours or I should have looked you up, of course. I hope Mrs. Romaine is here?"

"I hope she is better?" said Lord Garstin, with genuine concern. "We have all been desolated over her illness!"

Julian, who had nodded lightly to Loring, turned to Lord Garstin with a bright, affectionate laugh—also very like his mother's—and to Loring's quick and alert perception an added touch of artificiality became apparent in his manner as he said:

"It has been desolating, hasn't it? It's

very good of you to say so, though ! Thanks, I am delighted to say she is all right again. We had a terrific encounter as to whether she should or should not come to the affair, and she carried the day."

"Being perfectly restored to health she didn't see the force of allowing herself to be shut up and coddled by a silly boy."

The light, high-pitched voice, somewhat thin, as was the characteristic laugh with which the words were spoken, came from directly behind Julian, and as Loring, who had seen her coming, stepped forward to meet her, Mrs. Romaine, with a passing shake of her son's arm, stretched out her hand with graceful cordiality.

"Welcome back, Mr. Loring," she said. "I thought your first visit would have been to this good-for-nothing boy, but I am very glad to meet you here all the same. Lord Garstin," she continued, as she turned to shake hands, "I believe you were enquiring after my health ? I can't allow good breath to be wasted in that way ! I assure you it has been much ado about nothing, and I am perfectly, ridiculously well !"

She laughed as she finished, but a certain strained insistence had grown in her tone as she spoke, as though her desire to impress the fact she stated was strong enough to undermine her control of her voice.

But Loring, looking at her, was too fully occupied in criticising her appearance to notice the tone of her voice. There must have been some society fraud at the bottom of her reported illness, he decided, and that was why she was so anxious to pass it over; for certainly he had never seen her look better. She was admirably dressed, and she was very slightly and skilfully "made up"; a condition new to him in her, and one of which Marston Loring emphatically approved in women past their first youth. He told himself, moreover, that either his impression of her had been fainter than the reality, or else she had actually gained in what he could only define to himself—and define roughly and inadequately as he was well aware—as "grip." There was the faintest flavour of nerve and concentration behind her admirable society manner, which gave it a wonderful piquancy in the eyes of her observer; a flavour which

was evidently quite unconscious and involuntary, and had its origin in ingrain character. Loring admired power—of a certain class—in women.

In his interest in her expression, and his mental comments on it—determined, as they could not fail to be, by his own character—he was deceived by her cleverly arranged colouring into ignoring the almost painful thinness of her face ; nor did he understand how hollow and sunken those glittering eyes would have been less cleverly treated.

She replied gaily to Lord Garstin's gallant reception of her assurance, and then turned again to Loring with an easy interested question on his voyage.

"You are not the only returned traveller to-day !" she said, as he answered her. "By-the-bye, Julian, I was on the way to send you into the other room. There is some one there you will like to see !"

She smiled significantly up at him, patting his arm as she spoke, and Julian answered with boyish eagerness.

"In the other room ?" he said. "Well, perhaps I ought just to say how do you do,

you know, oughtn't I? Loring, old fellow, we shall meet again, of course? What are you going to do afterwards? We might go down to the club together? And he must come and dine with us, mustn't he, mother? Suppose you arrange it!" And with a comprehensive gesture and another, "I'll just say how do you do, I think!" he disappeared in the crowd.

Mrs. Romaine turned with a shrug of her shoulders and a pretty expressive grimace to the two men.

"Poor boy!" she laughed. "What a thing it is to be young! And what a tantalising spectacle a wedding must be under the circumstances! A pretty wedding, wasn't it?"

"An ugly wedding would be rather a refreshing change, don't you think?" suggested Loring. "One has seen a good many pretty ones, if you come to think of it!"

"You're not in the least changed by six months in Africa," returned Mrs. Romaine, shaking her head at him prettily. "Now, tell me, really, have you had a good time out there?"

The question was friendly and interested after a society fashion, but the interest was entirely on the surface, and the little talk that followed about Loring's experiences was joined in as a matter of course by Lord Garstin. It lasted until Mrs. Romaine said lightly :

"And now, I suppose, I ought to follow Julian's example and 'just say how do you do, don't you know!' I have only seen Mrs. Pomeroy in the distance as yet."

She nodded, and moved away, stopping constantly on her way through the rooms to exchange scraps of conversation until she came to where Mrs. Pomeroy, amiable, inert, and smiling as though she had been sitting there for the last three months, was holding a small court. She welcomed Mrs. Romaine as she had welcomed all comers.

"So glad to see you," she said placidly. "Such a long time ! And how are you ?"

"So immensely pleased to have you back again," said Mrs. Romaine enthusiastically ; there was a ring of genuineness in her voice which the fashionable exaggeration of her speech hardly warranted. "And you really

only arrived yesterday? Miss Newton—Mrs. Compton, I mean—was in a dreadful state of mind the other day lest her bridesmaid should fail her. And how is Maud? How sweet she looked! Quite the prettiest of the six. Where is she?”

“She was here just now,” returned Maud’s mother, as though that were quite a satisfactory answer to the question, and then as an afterthought she added vaguely: “I think she went to have an ice; your son took her.”

“Ah!” said Mrs. Romaine, smiling. “Then there is one perfectly happy person in the house!”

Mrs. Pomeroy only smiled with vague blandness; evidently the relations between the Romaines and the Pomeroyes had developed extensively before the departure of the latter for Cannes; and as evidently they were quite undisturbing to Miss Pomeroy’s mother.

“The bridesmaids’ dresses were very nice, I think,” she said, with amiable irrelevancy. “I was afraid they sounded trying. But it has been very pleasant altogether, hasn’t it?”

I wish we were going to stay in town. We had a shocking crossing."

A keen attention had sprung into Mrs. Romaine's eyes, and for an instant it seemed as though all the society gaiety died from her face, leaving exposed the hard, almost fiercely determined, foundation on which it was imposed. Then the foundation disappeared again.

"To stay in town!" she echoed lightly. "Why, are you not going to stay in town, dear Mrs. Pomeroy?"

"Unfortunately not," was the answer. "My sister who lives in Devonshire—I think you have heard me speak of her?—is ill, and has begged me to go and see her. So we are going for a week or ten days, I am sorry to say."

"I am sorry to hear," said Mrs. Romaine, with pretty concern. "Just at the beginning of the season, too. It's rather hard on poor Maud, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is hard on poor Maud, isn't it?" was the undisturbed response.

There was a moment's pause, and then under her paint a burning colour crept up

to the very roots of Mrs. Romaine's hair, and her eyes shone.

"My dear Mrs. Pomeroy," she began gaily, but speaking rather quickly, too, and in a higher pitch than was usual with her, "don't you remember, months ago, promising to lend me Maud [for a little while? This is the very opportunity. Of course," she lowered her voice a little, "I wouldn't propose it if you did not know quite as well as I do how the land lies. But, as I think we two old mothers are of one mind on that point, I shan't scruple. Let Maud come to me, if she will, while you are in Devonshire. Oh, of course it needn't mean anything—it's an old promise, you know, and she and I are great friends on our own account. Talk of the angels!" she went on gaily, nodding towards a slim, white figure coming towards them with Julian in its immediate wake.

Maud Pomeroy was looking as pretty and as proper as she had looked every day since she had emerged from the school-room, but there was a little flush on her face which was not habitual to her. She returned Mrs. Romaine's greeting with the grateful

cordiality so pretty from a girl to an older woman, evinced as was her wont more by manner than by speech; and indeed Mrs. Romaine gave her little time for speech.

"Your mother has been telling me of this dreadful Devonshire business!" she said. "And I've had what I flatter myself is a happy thought! I want you to come to me, Maud, dear, while your mother is away. You know you promised ages ago to let yourself be lent to me for a little while, and this is the very opportunity, isn't it?"

It would not have been "the thing" under the circumstances that any one of the trio should glance at Julian; consequently no one noticed the curious flash of expression that passed across his face as his mother spoke. Maud Pomeroy hesitated and looked dutifully at her mother.

"It's very kind of Mrs. Romaine, Maud, dear, isn't it?" said Mrs. Pomeroy with non-committal amiability.

"It is sweet of her," responded Maud prettily.

"Well, then, do let us consider it settled.

I shall enjoy it of all things. When do you go, dear Mrs. Pomeroy? To-morrow week? Oh, it will be too tantalising to whisk Maud away when she had just begun to enjoy herself; wouldn't it, Maud?"

Miss Pomeroy hesitated again, and the colour on her cheeks deepened by just a shade. She did not glance at her mother this time.

"Thank you very much," she said at last. "But shan't I be a nuisance to you?"

There was just the touch of charmingly conventional demur in her tone which made her submission seem, as all her actions seemed, the result of a gentle, easily influenced temperament. Mrs. Romaine assured her merrily that she would indeed be a terrible nuisance, but that she herself would do her best to bear it, and then rose, her eyes very bright.

"I must run away now," she said. "I'm so delighted that we've settled it. Let me know when to expect you, then, dear. Good-bye, Mrs. Pomeroy; I'll take every care of your child and return her when you want

her—only don't let it be too soon ! I needn't take you away, sir," she continued, turning to Julian. He had been standing by ever since that flash had passed over his face with an expression of eager interest in the discussion. "I dare say you're not in any hurry. No, you need not even come downstairs with me. I see Mr. Loring. He'll take care of me, I'm sure."

Mr. Loring, who was within hearing, as the tone of the words implied—indeed, they were more than half addressed to him—came up promptly.

"For how long may I have that privilege?" he said.

She explained to him lightly as he shook hands with Mrs. Pomeroy and her daughter, and then with another farewell and a pretty, affectionate "*Au revoir!*" to Julian, she turned away with him.

He put her into her carriage and she held out her hand with a gesture of thanks and farewell.

"Thanks," she said ; her tone and manner alike were very friendly and familiar in the exaggerated style which had certainly grown

on her ; and they seemed to imply something beyond the superficial interest to which she had kept, perforce, in her society intercourse with him. "It is so pleasant to see you again ! When will you come to see me quietly ? Before you are hard at work, you know ! To-morrow, now ? To-morrow happens to be a free day with me. Come to tea. Good bye !"

CHAPTER XII

TEN minutes after Mrs. Romaine's departure Julian was standing before Mrs. Pomeroy, his whole demeanour typical of the man who lingers, knowing that he should linger no longer.

"What a nuisance appointments are!" he said, with a boyish frankness of discontent which was irresistible. "I wish I could stay a little longer, but I know I oughtn't." He laughed quite ruefully, and fixed a pair of ardent eyes on Miss Pomeroy's demurely averted face. "It's been such an awfully jolly affair, hasn't it? And it's so awfully jolly to have you in town again"—this, with delightful deference, to Mrs. Pomeroy. "Well, I really must go, you know! Good-bye! Perhaps you won't be staying very much longer?"

"If you stay here bemoaning yourself very much longer we shall probably leave before you do!" suggested Miss Pomeroy, with the rather faint smile which was the only sign of amusement she ever gave, and which always accompanied her own mild witticisms. Julian turned to her eagerly.

"Now, that's awfully unkind!" he said. "You won't bully me like that in Queen Anne Street, will you?" The term "bullying" was so profoundly inapplicable to Miss Pomeroy's words that its use suggested a certain amount of arrangement rather than absolute spontaneity about Julian's speech. But exaggeration was the fashion, and not to be commented on. "Come in a very kind frame of mind, won't you?" he went on pleadingly.

"Am I a very violent person?" the girl answered, with the same smile. "Good-bye!" She held out her hand as she spoke, and Julian took it with laughing reluctance.

"You are an absolutely heartless person," he said daringly, "to dismiss me like this! However, I suppose you are right. If you

didn't dismiss me I probably shouldn't go, and I really ought, you know!"

"You've told us that before; now do it!" was the answer. "Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" returned Julian, with mock meekness. He shook hands again, which seemed hardly necessary, and then he turned away.

But the necessity which enforced his departure had apparently slackened its pressure on him by the time he actually left the house. As he walked away down the street there was no sign about him of that haste which should characterise a man who has lingered to the risking of an appointment, or who has, indeed, any engagement in immediate prospect. The bride and bridegroom had already left, and people were beginning to go, and until he reached the end of the street in which was Mrs. Halse's house, he was passed every instant by carriages to whose occupants his hat had to be smilingly lifted. Then he turned into a main thoroughfare, and hailed a hansom—still not in the least like a man in a hurry. He gave the cabman an address in the Temple, and was driven away.

His face as he went would have been a curious study to any onlooker possessed of the key to its expression; to any onlooker who could have detected the constant struggle for dominance between something that seemed to lie behind its new artificiality and that artificiality itself, evidently maintained under an instinctive sense of the chances of observation. It was not until he turned his key in the lock of a set of chambers in the Temple that the boyish vivacity died wholly out of his face; he went into his room—he shared the chambers with another embryo barrister—shutting the door behind him; and as he did so he seemed to have shut in, not the light-hearted young fellow who had paid the cabman in the street below, but another man altogether. No one looking at him now could doubt that this was the real Julian Romaine of to-day, as certainly as that light-hearted young fellow had been the real Julian Romaine of a year ago. This was a man with a hard, angry face; a face on which the anger stood revealed, not as the expression of the moment, but as the normal expression of

a mind always sore, always at war, always fiercely implacable.

The room was plainly, almost barely furnished, and there was no trace of any of the luxury that surrounded him in Queen Anne Street. His smart, carefully got-up figure looked absolutely incongruous among such unusual surroundings, as he crossed to the window, and flinging himself down in a shabby easy-chair, lighted a cigarette. He threw his cigarette-case on the table, and then drew out of the breast-pocket of his coat a couple of letters.

He had read them before, evidently, but as evidently they had lost none of their interest for him. He read them both through attentively, and as he did so there came to his mouth a set which his mother, could she have seen it, would have recognised instantly ; which any one, indeed, must have recognised who had ever seen his dead father. Both the letters dealt with money matters ; one was from a bookmaker, the other from a broker whose name was far from bearing an unblemished character in the City ; and both referred to large sums of money recently made

on the turf and on the Stock Exchange by Julian Romaine.

He flung the last on the table as he finished it, and there was an expression in his eyes of reckless, rebellious triumph not good to see.

“It’s a good haul!” he said, half aloud. “A good haul! Now, with what I’ve got already——” He rose and went across to the writing-table, unlocked a drawer, and taking out various papers, began to make rapid calculations.

Then—his eyes hard and intent on his work—he stretched out his hand and felt in the drawer for another paper. He took out an envelope, and drew out the letter it contained without glancing at it. A folded paper fell out as he did so, and as though the slight sound had roused him, he glanced at it quickly, and from it to the open letter in his hand. Apparently it was not the letter to which he had intended to refer, for his face changed suddenly and completely.

“I can’t take your money. Try and understand that I can’t!—Clemence.”

His fingers tightened upon the thin sheet

of paper until the knuckles whitened, and the eager calculation vanished utterly from his face, overwhelmed as it seemed by the fierce tumult of warring passions that struggled now in every line. Impotent anger which was the more violent for something within itself which was not anger; reckless defiance; a wild, raging desperation behind all, which was nearly hatred; all these emotions were faintly shadowed forth on his face as he stared down at the few simple words. All these emotions had been surging in his heart during the six months that were gone, and it was their unceasing strife and tumult which was rousing into life the new Julian Romaine, latent for so many years.

It was to that which was least broadly painted on his face that all these passionate forces owed their life. As with a wild animal wounded by a dart, and feeling that dart—lodged in his side—pricking and piercing him, who plunges wildly hither and thither, chafing and striving in blind, brute fashion to rid himself of the sensation he cannot understand; and in his very efforts presses in the cause of his pain, increases his suffer-

ings, and again redoubles his struggles and his fury, not knowing that he is his own tormentor; so it had been, in a sense, with Julian Romayne during the last six months. The dart in his case was double-edged; its edges were the strange, weak reality of his love for Clemence, and a stinging sense of shame. It had lodged in that almost inanimate better part of his nature. He had left that little room in Camden Town smarting and wincing under it, and it had never ceased to prick him since. Scarcely less blind and ignorant under such circumstances than "a beast having no understanding" in his total want of all principle, except the principles of worldly wisdom, with his utterly dormant moral perception—his morality, such as it was, being the merest matter of habit and conventionality—the effect on him of the smart was first the developement in him of a blind, unreasoning resentment; and then, as anger proved of no avail, a passionate rousing and rising of all his latent forces in repudiation of his discomfort.

To charge upon some one else the difficulties which he had created for himself, to

provide some object against which his blind sense of wrath and rebellion could pit itself, was a primary instinct with such a nature as Julian's, so situated, and that object was ready to his hand. The first article in the faith of the new Julian Romaine was the belief that he had been forced into his present position by his mother; that he had been parted from his wife by his mother; that he had been covered with humiliation by his mother. Every fresh stab, every movement of revolt, as that two-edged dart pressed itself deeper into his consciousness with every struggle he made for freedom, added something to the account he held against her; increased the bitterness of his resentment against, her and brought it one degree nearer to hatred. His love for her, in spite of its charm of expression, had been the merest boyish sentiment; with no roots deeper than those afforded by easy companionship and apparent indulgence; founded on habit and expediency rather than on respect. Real devotion would have seemed out of place in the atmosphere of affectation and superficiality in which he had been reared,

and he had known only its travesty. On this, the first real conflict between his will and hers, that travesty showed itself for what it was, and shrivelled into nothingness. To free himself from her control, became the one object and desire of his life. In doing this, and in doing this only, to his distorted perceptions, lay release from the stinging, goading misery of his present life, and to do this one means only was adequate—money. With money at his command the victory, as he conceived it, would be his. Some centre, some mainspring had necessarily to grow up in the confused strivings and blind, desperate impulses of a newly-awakened nature, and gradually that centre had declared itself in an unreasoning determination to make money.

But there were in Julian Romaine tendencies, latent, or nearly so, throughout his youth and early manhood; manifested during those easy, untempted periods only in a slight superficiality, a slight want of perception as to the boundary line between truth and falsehood; but radical factors in his being. In the shock and jar of the mental struggle and

quickenings involved in the continued presence in his consciousness of that remorseless dart, these tendencies leapt into over-stimulated life and grew, strengthened, and developed, with the unnatural rapidity of such life, until his whole character seemed to be overshadowed by them. In Julian Romaine's being, woven in and out with the threads which had hitherto seemed so pliable and colourless; those threads of all shades, from pure white to dark grey, which make up character in every man; were sundry grim black threads—threads such as are only to be plucked out when the very heart's blood of the man has spent itself in the struggle, and when in that struggle he has come very near to God. It may be that the sins of the fathers are indeed visited on the children in this sense; in the dictation of the form taken by that struggle with evil which is every man's portion; and sometimes—for purposes of which no man may presume to judge—in the exceptional agony of that struggle. Julian Romaine, the son of a liar and thief, and, moreover, of a woman whose morality was the morality of conventionality

and nothing more, had an instinctive faculty for, an instinctive inclination towards, dishonesty of word and deed. Such a twist of his moral consciousness as had been predicted for him, a little child of five years old, by Dr. Aston, had lain dormant among the possibilities of his being throughout the nineteen years that intervened. It was this inheritance which, in the sudden upheaval of his moral nature, had awakened, asserted itself, and seized, as it were, the first place in his nature.

Throughout his boyhood, easy as it had been, untouched by any strong passion or desire, he had lied now and again, naturally and instinctively. He had lied to save himself trouble, to save himself some slight reproach—as he had lied to his mother on the subject of his visit to Alexandria, to save himself from the confession of having forgotten her commission. He had lied to Clemence from first to last, and the first prick of that dart, which was now his constant companion, had touched him when he first felt shame for those lies. But there was a reckless, calculating deception about his life

now which went deeper and meant more. He lied to his mother with every word and action, and with the unreasoning cruelty of his mental attitude towards her—there is nothing towards which a man can be so heartless as the object to which he has transferred his own wrong-doing—he hugged his deception of her, and revelled in the sense of independence and power it gave him. The endless deception which the fundamental falsity of his present life necessitated, radiated on every side. To please his mother, as he told himself with an ugly smile, he had flirted with Miss Pomeroy in the early part of the winter until—a certain distance in her manner to him melting—he had hailed her departure for Cannes as a blessed reprieve. He had flirted with her this afternoon at Mrs. Halse's, excited by the news contained in the two letters he had since re-read, reckless in the prospect of release they brought nearer to him, and with a certain delight in the daring defiance of consequences. He had lied to Lord Garstin when that good-natured mentor had let fall a warning word as to the "bad form" of gambling; he lied to his coach

when his frequent absences were commented on.

In that desperate craving for money, in which all the passion of his life was centering itself, dishonesty of deed was the natural and inevitable corollary of dishonesty of word. The possession of money was his one object in life; his conscience as to the means by which that money was to be obtained he deliberately put into abeyance for the time being. He had become possessed in the course of the last six months of some thousands, not one of which had been earned by honest work; much of which had come to him by more than questionable means.

That two-edged dart must have been finely tempered that it never seemed to blunt! The dormant life in that higher part of him, to which it had penetrated, must have been life indeed, that it should throb and quiver stronger and stronger, side by side with all that was lowest and worst in him, making the struggle grow always fiercer, and goading him on and on. The dart owed its edge, the life its growing

sensitiveness, to a touch which lay always on Julian's consciousness, haunting him night and day. Not to be driven away or obliterated; not to be crowded out of his soul by any stress of evil passion; a white light on the soiled, tangled web of his life, which shone steadily in the strength of a power no struggle of his could touch; was the thought of Clemence. Clemence, who had trusted him; Clemence, hoping, longing, loving him, as he knew in every wretched fibre; Clemence, for whose presence he longed at times with a heart-sickness of longing which reacted in a very orgy of passionate bitterness. He had received a note from her a few days after her disappearance, telling him in a few simple words that she had got work; that she relied on him not to drive her out of it by trying to see her, until he "was ready," as she phrased it. Again and again a reckless impulse to see her, and force his will upon her, had seized him, but something had always held him back. Again and again he had sent her money, always to have it returned to him with a little line of hope or patience. In the reception of those notes;

in the writhing love, and longing, and shame they stirred in him, the dart went home and tortured him indeed.

He crushed the sheet of common note-paper almost fiercely in his hand now, and thrust it away to the back of the drawer from which it had come. He caught up the paper which had fallen from it—the cheque he had sent her three days before—and tore it savagely into fragments. Then he swept the papers on which he had been busy unheedingly into a drawer, locked it sharply, and rose, white to the very lips.

“It can’t be long now,” he muttered. “It shan’t be! Men make their piles in a day—in an hour; why should not I? It shan’t be long!”

He stood for a moment, his hand clenched, his features compressed, his eyes full of a sullen fire. Then he turned sharply away and left the room.

There was no trace of any fire about him, however, except the harmless irradiation of youth and good spirits, when he opened the door of his mother’s drawing-room a few minutes before their dinner-hour. He had

spent the intervening hour at his club, the most lightly good-natured, and thoroughly easy-going and irresponsible young man there, and there was precisely the same character about him now as he crossed the room to his mother.

CHAPTER XIII

THERE had been a slight, sudden movement as Julian opened the door, as though Mrs. Romaine had changed her attitude quickly. She was leaning forward now, looking at an illustrated paper, but the cushions behind her were tumbled and crushed, as if she had been leaning back on them, and leaning heavily. She was wearing a tea-gown, and she seemed to keep her face rather carefully in shadow.

“Rather an amusing party, wasn’t it?” she said lightly, looking up as he came in. “Everybody goes to that woman’s. I can’t imagine why. Well, and is there any news, sir?”

“I’m afraid not,” returned Julian gaily. “I’ve spent an hour at the club to try and

pick up some crumbs for you, but there was nothing going."

The manner of each to the other was precisely the same, now that they were alone together, as it had been when they addressed one another incidentally in the course of general conversation. The very familiarity between them had a flavour of artificiality about it, and that flavour was mainly given, strangely enough, by Mrs. Romaine rather than by Julian. It was her manner, not his, that lacked ease and overdid the spontaneity. They chatted brightly about men and things, but she never asked him a single personal question, though at any incidental allusion let fall by him as to his doings a faint contraction of the muscles about her eyes gave her a hungry, concentrated look, as of a creature catching at a crumb. It seemed to be in a great measure that tendency to keen intentness of expression which had so greatly altered her face.

"You see I've been lazy!" she said lightly, indicating her dress with a slight gesture as they sat down to dinner. They were going out in the evening, and she

usually dressed before dinner on such occasions. "I really couldn't be bothered to dress before!"

The lamplight was full on her face now, and Julian, his attention drawn to her by the words, saw that she looked frightfully haggard and worn under her paint and her little air of gaiety. Paint had ceased to be an appendage of full dress with her since her three days' illness. The combination added a touch of repulsion to his feeling towards her. But his tone as he answered her was the tone of affectionate concern, over-elaborated by the merest shade only.

"You've not over-tired yourself, I hope, dear?" he said. "I don't believe you ought to go out again to-night, do you know!"

Mrs. Romaine's thin fingers were tearing fiercely at the pocket-handkerchief in her lap as he spoke, and her eyes were bright with pain. It seemed as though her ears had caught that subtle shade of over-elaboration, though they must have been quick indeed to do so. But she answered, almost before he had finished speaking, in a rather high-pitched tone of eager determination.

“Silliest of boys,” she said; “the topic is threadbare. I am quite well! Oh, it is very evident that my retiring to bed for a day or two is an unparalleled event, or you would not be quite so slow in grasping the fact that it is possible to recover after such a terrific crisis! Now, do promise not to talk any more about what you don’t in the least understand!”

The merriment of her tone was fictitious, even to Julian’s unheeding ear, but he took it up with a mental shrug of his shoulders. It was not his fault, he told himself, if she would overdo herself for the sake of a little excitement.

He told himself the same thing, carelessly enough, when he put her into her carriage two or three hours later. It was early; Mrs. Romaine had declared the party to be insufferably dull and had stayed only half an hour, during which time she had been as vivacious and attractive as usual. But towards the end her eyes had become feverishly bright, and Julian, as he took her out, could feel that she was trembling from head to foot.

"Are you coming home?" she said to him.

"Well, if you don't mind, dear, I was thinking of going to look up Loring at the club."

A breath of relief parted Mrs. Romaine's lips, and she answered hastily. Apparently she had no desire for her son's company on her way home.

"Go, by all means!" she said. "Of course I don't mind!"

She pulled up the window almost abruptly, nodding to him with a smile, the singular ghastliness of which was, presumably, referable to some effect of gaslight. Then as the carriage rolled away she sank back and let her face relax into an expression of utter weariness, with a little gasping catch of her breath as of deadly physical exhaustion.

His words about Loring had been a mere figure of speech on Julian's part, but he did intend to go to the club, and he carried his intention into effect. He glanced round the smoking-room as he went in to see if Loring was there, but the fact that he was not visible in no way affected his serenity.

He was so altered from the boy of a twelvemonth before, and his intercourse with Loring had been so completely suspended during the period of his developement, that their friendship seemed now to belong to some previous phase of his existence; it was his sense that he had passed utterly out of touch with the man with whom he had once been intimate, together with a conviction that Loring's keen perceptions would be by no means a desirable factor in his surroundings at the moment, that had dictated his demonstration of delight at Loring's reappearance. An outward show of enthusiasm was a very effective blind, in his opinion.

His manner was regulated on the same principle on Loring's appearance in the smoking-room about half an hour later. He was on his way to the card-room, and he was anything but pleased at the frustration of his plans in that direction; but his reception of Loring indicated, rather, that he had spent the last half-hour in watching for him.

"Here you are at last, old man!" he cried. "I thought you'd turn up some time or other! What became of you this afternoon? I never

saw you after you disappeared with my mother."

The two men had met close to the door, and they were still standing, Loring, as *blasé* and imperturbable-looking as usual, with his observant eyes on Julian's face.

"I didn't care to spoil sport!" he returned with a significant smile. "You seemed to be particularly well employed!"

Julian laughed — the conscious, not ill-pleased laugh which belonged to his part. Such contingencies were all incidental to the situation.

"Oh, come, old boy," he said deprecatingly. Then he laughed again, and added: "I suppose my mother said something to you?"

"No!" returned Loring quietly. "I happen to have eyes, you see!"

"Don't make magnifying glasses of them, then!" was the laughing retort. "Now then, there are several fellows here who have been asking for you."

But as Julian glanced round he became aware that the room chanced to be almost empty. Loring understood at the same time

that he had wished to make the conversation general and impersonal, and a slight smile touched his lips.

Marston Loring had various reasons of his own for not intending to allow himself to be eluded by Julian Romaine. The change in the young man alone would have excited his curiosity; and sundry details which had already come to his knowledge, notably one across which he had stumbled in the City that morning, had quickened that curiosity. His suspicions of the preceding autumn, that there was something behind Julian's life as it appeared on the surface, were by no means forgotten by him. His departure for Africa had taken him out of the way of the crisis, but he more than half suspected that a crisis there had been. The connection between the present and the past, and the means by which it could be most advantageously applied to the furtherance of his own ends, were the problems he had set himself to solve.

"We're rather in luck!" he said. "We can have a quiet chat together."

He established himself lazily and com-

fortably as he spoke, as Julian with much apparent satisfaction flung himself into another chair, and took out his cigar-case.

Julian's questions followed one another thick and fast. His interest in his friend's life during the last six months seemed to be inexhaustible in its intelligence and sympathy. He had a great deal to tell, too; and he told it so fluently and gaily as almost to disguise the fact that the allusions to his own doings were of the most superficial type. But at last there was a pause. Julian was pulling out his watch, and saying something about going home, when Loring lighted a fresh cigar and opened the proceedings—as he conceived them.

"I heard of you in the City this morning!" he said nonchalantly.

There was no pause in the movement with which Julian returned his watch to his pocket; nothing, absolutely, to betray the fact that the words were a surprise to him. Yet they were a surprise, and an exceedingly unpleasant one. His transactions in the City he had arranged to keep secret; that their nature should become known was

eminently undesirable, and he had decided that the fact itself would be inconsistent with his pose before the world. That Loring should be the man to unearth them was exceptionally unfortunate.

“Did you?” he said lightly; “and who was saying what of me in the City—a vague locality, by-the-bye.”

“The introduction of your name was accidental — accidents will happen, you know, even in Adams’s office. Is that a definite locality enough to please you?”

Julian burst into a boyish laugh and flung himself back in his chair; he carried his cigar to his lips as he did so, not noticing apparently that it had gone out. Loring noticed it, however.

“What a fellow you are, Loring!” he cried. “You’ve not been in England three days before you unearth a poor chap’s most private little games! I say, you’ll keep it dark, won’t you? I wouldn’t have it come round to my mother, you know! She’s so awfully generous to me, and it might hurt her feelings.”

There was an ingenuous frankness and

confidence in his voice which gave to the whole affair the aspect of a youthful escapade. Loring smiled as he answered :

“I wouldn’t have a hand in hurting Mrs. Romaine’s feelings for the world.” He paused a moment, and then added carelessly, as if the whole transaction was the merest matter of course : “ Been doing much ? ”

Julian shook his head.

“No, of course not,” he said lightly. “Only a little occasional lark, don’t you know. I leave the big things to clever fellows like you. By-the-bye, Loring, I’d no idea you did anything in that way.”

Loring puffed slowly at his cigar before he answered.

“I’m an old hand,” he said nonchalantly. “I wait for certainties, my boy !” He paused again. “To tell you the truth,” he said slowly, fastening a keen, cleverly-veiled gaze on Julian’s face, “I did not ask the question altogether idly. It occurred to me that if you had made anything worth mentioning you might be on the look-out for a means of—well, we’ll put it mildly and say—increasing it.”

There was considerable meaning in Loring's voice, careless as it was. Julian became very still, and into his eyes there crept an eager, hungry light which harmonised ill with the fixed nonchalance of the rest of his features as he answered with a laugh :

"I don't know the fellow who could refuse to admit that soft impeachment! We're all in the same boat as far as that goes, I take it. You haven't got a good thing up your sleeve, old man, have you?"

Loring smiled ambiguously.

"Most 'good things' would come to an untimely end if every one with a finger in them spread them abroad, my boy!" he observed. "Since it can't concern you personally—if you've no capital—we'll say no more about it."

A certain amount of Loring's practice dealt with financial affairs; he was no mean authority on City matters, and there was something about his manner indescribably provocative. Julian leaned forward with a movement of irrepressible eagerness.

"Is it really a good thing?" he said. He spoke with a quick, low-toned directness

which put aside the fencing of the previous dialogue, and replied not to what Loring had said, but to what he had implied. Loring looked him full in the face and answered laconically and significantly :

“Rather!”

The hungry light was burning fiercely in Julian's eyes, and he turned his face away from Loring and began to fidget with an ash-tray lying on the table by him.

“Capital?” he said. “What do you call capital, now?”

“Oh, anything between ten thousand and five-and-twenty thousand,” said Loring carelessly.

There was a silence. Julian's brain was working feverishly, and Loring was well content to let it work. At last Julian began to speak in a low, rapid tone, with the air of one who has made up his mind to frank confidence. He had intended to keep Loring at arm's length; he had decided now to play a bolder game, and use him.

“Look here, Loring,” he said, “I may as well make a clean breast of it! I have gone a bit farther than I said. You see,

as I told you, my mother's most awfully generous, and I wouldn't let a hint of this get to her for the world; but a man doesn't like to feel that he's dependent on his mother for everything, don't you know—especially if he's thinking of marrying. You know what it is when one once begins to feel the money come in! I've gone on, you see—as lots of fellows do—and I've got a tidy little pile. Of course I'm very keen on making it more before — well, before I propose, don't you know! And if you can give me a lift up I shall be eternally obliged."

He stopped, and Loring smoked for a minute or two in silence. At last he said slowly :

"I understand! It's natural, of course. Well, I don't stand alone in the affair, to tell you the truth. There's another man to be consulted. But I'll talk the matter over with him, and if I can manage to get you in you may be sure I will. You shall have a line in a day or two, or I'll see you again." Loring dropped the end of his cigar into the ash-tray and rose.

CHAPTER XIV

THE clock in Mrs. Romaine's drawing-room chimed the half-hour—half-past four—and Mrs. Romaine glanced up as she heard it. She was alone, sitting at her writing-table answering invitations. She was looking better than she had looked on the preceding day—less haggard, and physically stronger.

She answered and put aside the last invitation-card, and then she drew out a letter in a straight, clear, girl's writing. It was signed: "Affectionately yours, Maud Pomeroy," and it bore reference to Miss Pomeroy's prospective visit to her. Mrs. Romaine glanced through it, the vigour of her face seeming to accentuate as she did so, and then proceeded to write a few cordial, affectionate lines in answer. She was just directing the envelope when a servant came in with tea.

Mrs. Romaine rose.

"Send these letters to the post," she said.

She glanced at the clock again as she spoke, and at that moment the front-door bell rang.

Left alone, Mrs. Romaine moved quickly to the looking-glass, and took an anxious, critical look at herself; it was as though she had learnt to distrust her appearance. The inspection, however, proved satisfactory, apparently; and as she turned quickly away as she heard steps upon the stairs, there was a self-dependence and sense of power in the bright, expectant keenness of her eyes.

"Mr. Loring!" announced the servant, and Mr. Loring followed his name into the room.

"I am very glad to see you," said Mrs. Romaine, advancing to meet him. "This is a much better way of welcoming a friend than our meeting yesterday. I think I shall celebrate the occasion by saying not at home to any one else. Julian will be in, perhaps, and he will like to have you to himself. Not at home, Dawson," she added in conclusion.

There was a verve and brightness about her manner which was not exactly its usual vivacity, and which faintly suggested the presence of some kind of special excitement in her mind.

Loring's perceptions were in a state of rather abnormal acuteness; the situation had meanings for him, which had braced up his forces not inconsiderably. He detected that inward excitement about Mrs. Romaine instantly, and he was convinced also, though he could hardly have given a reason for the conviction, that there was not the smallest chance of Julian's appearance. Both circumstances he reckoned as points in his favour in the game he was going to play.

"It's very charming of you," he said. "Do you know this is the first time I have really felt that coming back to London means—something."

He took the chair she had indicated to him on the other side of the little tea-table as he spoke, and there was nothing lame or unfinished about the words spoken as he spoke them. His eyes were fixed upon Mrs. Romaine, but she was pouring out tea with

so intent a look on her face as almost to suggest preoccupation. She did not look up, nor did the tone of his voice reach her, except superficially, apparently, for she replied with a pleasant, friendly laugh.

"I should hope it did mean 'something,' indeed," she said. "Friends should count for 'something,' surely, especially when they have really taken the trouble to miss you very much. Have you had such an unusually fascinating time in Africa, then?"

She handed him a cup of tea, and as he rose to take it from her, he answered:

"Well, not exactly that. I'm afraid I don't believe in fascinating times, you know. Perhaps I am too much of a pessimist."

He spoke with that tone of personal revelation and confidence which is always more or less attractive to a woman, coming from a man; and Mrs. Romaine responded with the gentle loftiness of sympathy which the position demanded.

"I've often been afraid you felt like that," she said. "And it is really quite wrong of you, don't you know. You ought to be such a particularly well-satisfied person! I suppose

you are horribly ambitious? Now, tell me, has your business gone off as well as you hoped? I have been so interested in your delightful articles!"

"Does anything go off as well as one had hoped?" was the reply, spoken with a cynical smile, indeed, but with a certain daring deprecation of her disapproval, which was not unattractive. "No, I ought not to carp," he continued quickly. "I have every reason to be satisfied."

His tone implied considerably more in the way of success and latent possibilities about his present position than the words themselves conveyed; and Mrs. Romaine answered with cordial, delicately-expressed congratulations, which drifted into a species of general questionings as to his doings, less directly personal, but implying that he might count on her sympathy if he chose to confide in her in greater detail. This was no part of Loring's plan, however. He led by almost imperceptible degrees away from the subject, and before very long they were talking London gossip as though he had never been away, the only perceptible result of his absence

evincing itself in the touch of additional intimacy which his return seemed to have given their relations, necessarily at Mrs. Romaine's instigation.

The talk touched here and there, and by-and-by an enquiry from Loring after a mutual friend elicited a crisper laugh than usual, and an expressive movement of the eyebrows, from Mrs. Romaine.

"Haven't you heard?" she said. "Oh, it's an old story now, of course! Well, they don't come to town this season, I believe. Lady Ashton suffers from—neuralgia!"

She laughed again, and then in response to a cynical and incredulously interrogative ejaculation from Loring, she clasped her hands lightly on her knee and went on with the animation of a woman who has a good story to tell and enjoys telling it.

"She contracted the complaint, they say, in a poky little church in Kensington into which Gladys Ashton strolled one morning and got herself married. Oh, dear no! Her mother wasn't there! That's one of the points of the affair. And Lord Rochdale wasn't there either."

“Gladys Ashton jilted Rochdale after all !”

“After all !” assented Mrs. Romaine gaily. “After all that poor woman’s trouble, after the quite pathetic way in which she has slaved to catch him, she gets a letter from the ungrateful girl—at an afternoon tea, too, heaps of people there—to say that she is Mrs. Bob Stewart. Baccarat Bob you wretched men at the clubs call him, don’t you ?”

“That was enough to induce convulsions, let alone neuralgia,” commented Loring.

They both laughed, and the laugh was succeeded by a moment’s silence. Then Loring said casually :

“What has become of your cousin, Falconer, among other people, by-the-bye ? I don’t hear anything of him, and his grim presence was hardly to be overlooked. Have you any little escapade of his to reveal, now ?”

Mrs. Romaine laughed a little harshly.

“Unfortunately not,” she said. “His absence is due to the most characteristically orthodox causes. He was ill about three months ago. He went into a hospital sort

of place—one of those new things—and he was rather bad. Now he's somewhere or other recovering. I fancy he won't be in London again yet."

Loring received the news with a comment as indifferent as his question had been, and then there fell a second silence. Loring's eyes, very keen and calculating, were fixed upon the carpet; on Mrs. Romaine's face was an accentuation of the intent, preoccupied look which had lain behind all her previous gaiety. The two faces suggested curiously that the man and woman alike felt individually and each irrespective of the other that something in the shape of a prologue was over, and that the real interest of the interview might begin.

The silence was broken by Mrs. Romaine; she pushed the tea-table further from her and leaned back in her chair, as she said casually :

"Did you and Julian meet at the club last night?"

Loring followed her example and took an easier and more careless pose.

"Yes!" he said. "We had an hour's

talk together. I was very glad I had looked in. I hardly expected to find him there!"

Mrs. Romaine laughed, and the sound was rather forced. "Oh," she said lightly, "he is a tremendous clubbist! All young men go through the phase, don't you think?" She paused a moment, and her voice sounded as though her breath was coming rather quickly as she said carelessly :

"You find him a good deal altered, I dare say? Six months"—she paused; her breath was troublesome—"six months makes such a difference at his time of life!" she finished.

Loring looked at her. He had long ago decided that when a woman was "made up" it was of very little use to direct observation to anything but her eyes.

"Yes!" he said reflectively, as though debating a question already existing in his mind, and answering it for the first time. "He is altered! I suppose—yes, I suppose six months must make a difference!"

A sharp breath as at a sudden stab of pain had parted Mrs. Romaine's lips at his

first words, and he saw a hard, defiant brightness come into her eyes.

"I was very glad to see—well, may one allude to what one could not help seeing yesterday?" he went on in another and much lighter tone.

"One may allude to it confidentially!" returned Mrs. Romaine, and her tone was rather high-pitched and uneven. "Not otherwise, I am sorry to say—at present! Did Julian say anything about it?" Her tone as she asked the question was carelessness itself, but her fingers were tightly clenched round her handkerchief as she waited for the answer.

"A word or two!" returned Loring. "I inferred that it was only a question of time. Has it been going on long?"

"All the winter!" she answered, and again there was that little forced laugh. "You see, unfortunately, 'she' has been away! I had hoped that it would have come off before she went away, but it didn't!"

She stopped rather abruptly; and Loring, watching her keenly, said:

“You think it is time he should marry?”

“I think—well, yes, I suppose I do! Don’t you agree with me? You young men are so apt to get into mischief, you know!”

“I suppose I can hardly deny the general principle,” answered Loring with a slight smile, “though it is some time since I have been a young man in any practical sense! But as to Julian, I hardly know——”

“But you must know!” returned Mrs. Romaine quickly, and with an affected laugh. “And you must know, in the first place, that I’m relying on you for a good deal of co-operation—oh, of course, not in these delicate affairs!”

A certain shade of attention—just that attention which might become gravely or gaily sympathetic according to the demand made upon him—appeared in Loring’s manner. He replied to her last words with a gesture of mock deprecation which answered the tone in which they were spoken; but a quiet, reliable interest touched his voice as he spoke, which seemed to respond rather to the possibilities of the situation.

"You have only to command me!" he said.

There was a hungry intentness about Mrs. Romaine's mouth now, and about her clenched hand, which only a tremendous effort and the sacrifice of all reality of tone could have kept out of her voice.

"To tell you the truth," she said lightly, "there was rather a catastrophe in the autumn; a girl, you know, silly boy—the usual thing! I fancy it has upset him a good deal in every way, and there is nothing like marriage for settling a young man down after such an affair!"

She paused as though—while her confidence in her statement, and the point of view from which she had presented the matter stood in no need of confirmation—she yet craved to hear it subscribed to by another voice. And Loring nodded with grave, attentive assent.

"Quite so!" he said sententiously.

"Now, of course," she continued, "of course a woman can't know all the ins and outs of a young man's life, even when she's his mother. It's out of the question; and to be very frank with you"—there was some-

thing painful now about the lightness of her tone—"his mother had to be rather autocratic, and the boy didn't much like it. Consequently I can't feel sure that—well, that she knows even as much as she might about his affairs, now! That's why I'm confiding in you in this expansive way! I want you to look after him for me!"

Loring changed his position, and nodded again gravely and comprehendingly.

"I understand!" he said slowly. "I understand!" The statement was true in far wider sense than Mrs. Romaine could be aware of. There was a moment's silence, during which he seemed to deliberate deeply on the facts presented to him, watched intently by Mrs. Romaine; and then he roused himself, as it were. "I won't say that your confidence in me gives me great pleasure," he said, "because I hope you know that. I will simply say that I will do all I can!"

The words were admirably spoken, with a gentleness and consideration of tone and manner which were all the more striking from their contrast with his usual demeanour; and they carried an impression of strength and

sympathy such as no woman could have resisted. A strange spasm as of intense relief passed across Mrs. Romaine's face, and for the moment she did not speak. Then she said low and hurriedly :

"I have heard that he plays, and it—it worries me! A boy will often listen to a friend whom he respects, and—and—I rely on you."

"I consider myself honoured!"

A pause followed, and then Loring continued with an easy seriousness which was very reassuring :

"I am very glad to know all this, for it gives me a key, without which I might have blundered considerably! To return confidence for confidence, and to assure you that I really have some power to help you, I will say that I made a little discovery about Julian yesterday which perplexed me a good deal. I shall know now how to act. If he must speculate——"

He was interrupted. The daintily coloured face before him changed suddenly and terribly; a ghastly reality that lay behind that expression of carelessness seemed on the instant to crash through all veils and masks as Mrs.

Romayne rose to her feet with a hoarse cry, her face drawn and working, her hands stretched out as though to ward off something unendurably horrible.

"No!" she gasped, and she was absolutely fighting and struggling for breath, as though something clutched at her throat. "Not that! oh, good heavens, not that! You must stop it! You must prevent it. He must not! He must not! Do you hear me? He must not!"

There are some natures which not even contact with throbbing, vibrating reality can touch or thrill, and Loring, surprised, indeed, had risen also, cynical, imperturbable, and cool-headed as usual.

"By Jove!" he said to himself critically. "Who would have thought she had it in her?" The choked, agonised voice stopped abruptly, and he met her eyes, wild and fierce in their desperate command, and said quickly and soothingly :

"I will do anything you wish, I assure you! You have only to speak! I am grieved beyond all words to have distressed you so! I had no idea——"

A hoarse laugh broke from Mrs. Romaine, and she turned away with a strange gesture almost as though it were herself she derided, and Loring was forgotten by her, clasping her hands fiercely over her face. Loring paused a moment and then went on smoothly:

“There is nothing to disturb you, I assure you, in what I was going to say. Most young men have a turn for dabbling in speculation at some time or other, and though I know some ladies have a horror of it, I don’t think you would find that there is much foundation for that horror.” He stopped somewhat abruptly. He had suddenly remembered that he was speaking to the widow of William Romaine, of whose final collapse he knew the outline. He looked at the woman before him with her hidden face, her figure rigid and tense from head to foot, and thought to himself callously how curious these survivals of emotion were. She did not move or speak, and he went on with a tone of delicate sympathy:

“No doubt, if you really think it well to stop it with a high hand, it can be done! I ought to say that I have rather broken

confidence in revealing Julian's doings, as he is very anxious that you should not think him dissatisfied or ungrateful, and did not wish you to hear of them." A shiver shook the bowed figure from head to foot. "I'm afraid I thought more of reassuring you than of him! I thought that if you knew that he and I were in the same affair, and that he would act solely on my advice, you would, perhaps, feel happier about him!"

But the answer he wanted, the answer which would have enabled him to continue his reassurances on the purely personal line, was not forthcoming. Mrs. Romaine neither spoke nor moved. He had no intention of risking his position by foolhardiness, so he adjusted his line of argument to the darkness in which her silence left him.

"As I said, however," he continued gently, "if you prefer to talk to him on the subject, and ask him to give it up, no doubt he will do so rather than distress you! And if you lay your commands on me to that effect, I will certainly refuse to go any further with him! But may I say that I think you would be wiser to let things take their course? It

is not a good thing to thwart a young man in the frame of mind you have hinted at as being Julian's at present. If you can conquer your horror of the idea, I am sure you will be better satisfied in the end!"

There was a dead silence. At last Mrs. Romaine raised her head slowly, not turning her face towards Loring, but looking straight before her, as though utterly oblivious of his personal presence. There was a strange, fleeting dignity about her drawn face, with its wide, ghastly eyes; the dignity which comes from horror confronted.

"Take their course!" she said in a still, far-away voice. She paused a moment, and then went on in the same tone. "You think this is—inevitable?" The last word came with a strange ring.

"I think that any attempt at its prevention would be most undesirable," said Loring. "It might lead—of course, it is not very likely, but still it is possible—to private speculations on Master Julian's part!"

"Very well, then!" There was a curious, hard steadiness in her tone, as of one who perforce concedes a point to an adversary,

and braces every nerve afresh to face the new situation thus created.

"That is like you!" exclaimed Loring admiringly. The tone of her voice had passed him by. "You will be glad, I know! Now, let me say again how awfully sorry I am to have distressed you, and then I'll go. You'll be glad to get rid of me!"

She did not seem to hear the words, but as his voice ceased, she turned her face slowly towards him with a vague, uncertain look upon it, as though her consciousness was struggling back to him, and the life he represented, across a great gulf. She looked at him a moment, and then that dignity, and a strange pathos which that groping look had possessed, gave way before a ghastly smile.

"I'm afraid I've been making myself most ridiculous!" she said, and there was a difficult, uncertain sprightliness about her weak voice. "So awfully sorry! I'm rather absurd about speculation. Old memories with which I needn't bore you! You'll look after my boy, then? Thanks!" She held out her hand as she spoke with a little affected gesture, but as he placed his hand in it her fingers closed

with an icy clutch. "And now, do you know, I must send you away! Too bad, isn't it? But there is such a thing as dressing for dinner."

"Quite so," returned Loring gaily. "It is very good of you to have been bothered with me so long! Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" she answered. "You'll report progress, of course?"

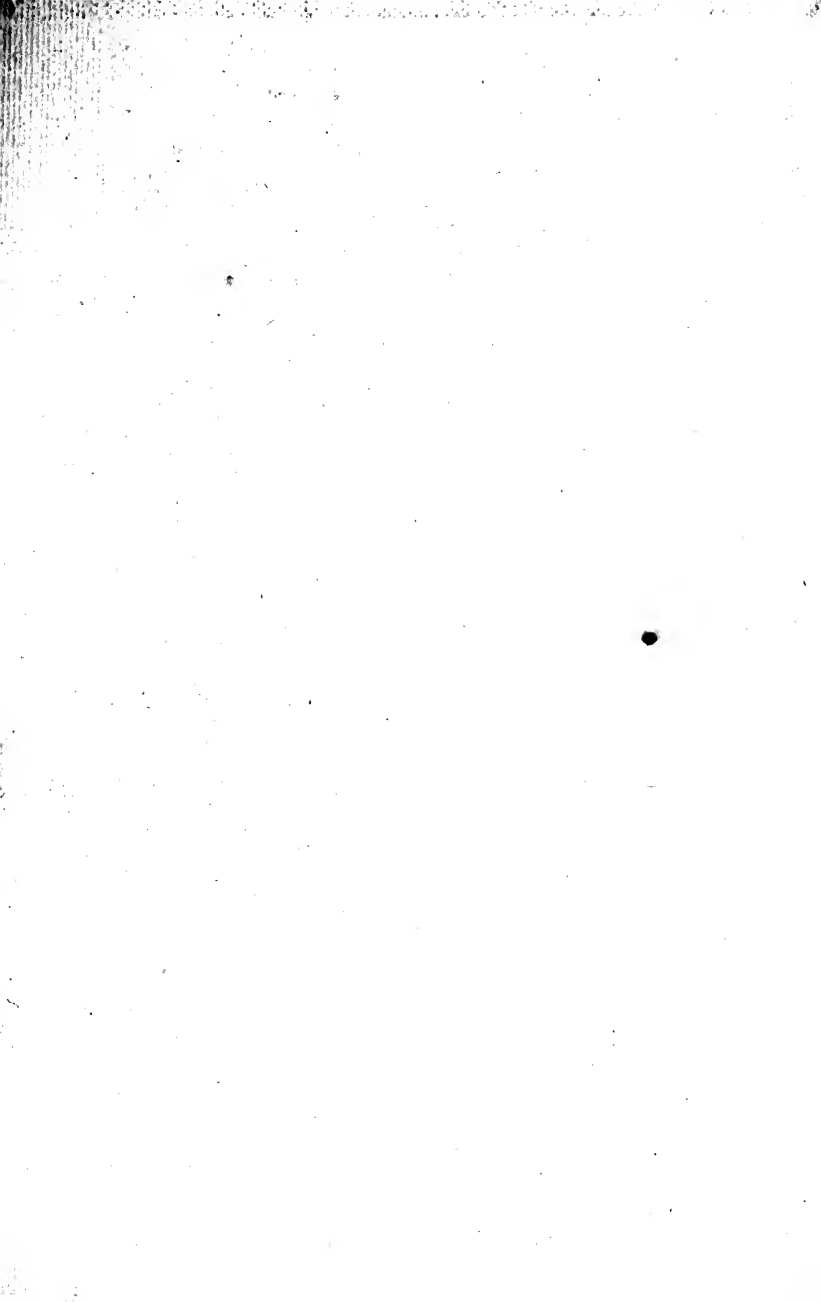
"Certainly! We're a pair of conspirators, are we not?"

When Mrs. Romaine came down to dinner that night her face was as haggard as though the interval intervening had held for her another three days' illness. But the hard determination in her eyes was more intense than ever.

END OF VOL. II







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